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Iconic Beast of Far North Endangered by Warming

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WASHINGTON (CN) - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will launch a full status review of the Pacific walrus, an iconic sea mammal important to the traditions, art and religion of many arctic peoples.

The agency has determined that a petition for listing the walrus under the Endangered Species Act contains sufficient information to warrant the review.

The petition, submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity, asserts that the Pacific walrus' sea-ice habitats in the Bering and Chukchi Seas are disappearing and being degraded by global warming. It also contends that the Arctic is warming faster than other regions of the globe and that Arctic summer sea ice, including the ice of the Chukchi Sea, is predicted to disappear or nearly disappear between 2012 and 2030. The petition further states that by 2050, the Bering Sea is predicted to lose about 40 percent of its winter sea ice unless emissions scenarios change.

The walrus relies on the arctic icepack as a substrate for giving birth and meeting during the mating season. The thinning of pack ice over the Bering Sea has reduced the amount of suitable resting habitat near optimal feeding grounds, which has resulted in greater separation of nursing calves and their mothers, according to the petition. This has led to nutritional stress for the young, and the females are having fewer calves.