
7. **CLIMATE: Shrinking ice forces U.S. to reconsider protections for walrus** (09/08/2009)

Patrick Reis, E&E reporter

The Interior Department will consider protecting the Pacific walrus under the Endangered Species Act in part because of the effects of climate change.

Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that it would conduct a full review of the walrus's status, saying that a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity presented enough evidence to merit a closer look.

The center argued that climate change will melt walruses' sea ice habitat in the Bering and Chukchi seas, forcing the animals onshore, where their tusks and flippers will be of less use in finding food and warding off predators.

To investigate these claims, the Fish and Wildlife Service will seek public comment on the walrus for the next two months and conduct its own studies of the mammal's population and the threats it faces. The agency in June released a partial population assessment of the walrus that found 15,000 specimens, down from prior counts of nearly 200,000. In releasing the survey, the agency said the full count was likely many times greater than 15,000, but environmental groups pointed to it as evidence of steep decline ([Greenwire](#), June 19).

Despite today's acknowledgement of potential threats from global warming, Interior has twice affirmed that the Endangered Species Act may not be used to address climate change. In adding the polar bear to the endangered species list in March 2008, the Bush administration published a special rule excluding greenhouse gases from review as a potential threat to endangered species. Despite outcry from environmental groups, the Obama administration upheld the special rule.

The center and other groups are suing to reverse the rule, arguing that the Endangered Species Act requires the service to consider all potential threats to the species it protects, even indirect ones such as greenhouse gas emissions.

Critics argue that such an approach relies on speculative science and have accused environmental groups of misusing endangered species protections to push a separate political agenda.

Rebecca Noblin, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said that even if an endangered species designation does not protect the walrus from greenhouse gas emissions, it would still add another layer of protection for the walrus against planned oil and gas drilling in the Chukchi Sea. The designation would require the Fish and Wildlife Service to identify the habitat the species needs to recover and protect that habitat from degradation by any federally connected activities.

Nonetheless, Noblin said, the walrus will suffer unless meaningful action is taken against global warming. When asked how one protects the species without controlling emissions, she replied, "You don't."
