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## News

### Conservation group sues for walrus protection



(AP Photo/U.S. Geological Survey, Steven Kazlowski, FILE)

This image provided by the U.S. Geological Survey shows a Pacific walrus tagged with a satellite radio transmitter, shot onto the animal by USGS scientists using a crossbow in this March, 2006 file photo taken on the Bering Sea spring sea ice. The Center for Biological Diversity sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne on Wednesday Dec. 3, 2008 for failing to act on a petition seeking protection for walrus under the Endangered Species Act. The Fish and Wildlife Service has nearly completed a comprehensive population count of walrus coordinated with Russian counterparts. The numbers are anticipated no later than January and possibly by the end of the year, he said.

Fish and Wildlife spokesman [Bruce Woods](#) said Wednesday the agency anticipates making a decision on the petition soon but has limited resources. Decisions on endangered species listings are driven by litigation, he said, forcing the agency to rank actions by court order rather than species need.

Global warming is blamed for Arctic sea ice shrinking to record low levels.

The [National Snow and Ice Data Center](#) said summer sea ice in 2008 reached the second lowest level, 1.74 million square miles, since satellite monitoring began in 1979. The loss was exceeded only by the 1.65 million square miles in 2007.

Like polar bears, listed as a threatened species in May, walruses depend on sea ice to breed and forage.

Walruses dive from ice over the shallow outer continental shelf in search of clams and other benthic creatures. Females and their young traditionally use ice as a moving diving platform, riding it north as it recedes in spring and summer, first in the northern [Bering Sea](#), then into the [Chukchi Sea](#) off Alaska's northwest coast.

Sea ice in the Chukchi Sea, shared with the Russian [Far East](#), for the last two years receded well beyond the outer continental shelf over water too deep for walruses to dive to reach clams. In the fall of 2007, herds congregated on [Alaska](#) and [Siberia](#) shores until ice re-formed.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, warming sea temperatures and sea ice loss may also be reducing walrus prey at the bottom of the ocean.

The group hopes a listing could slow plans for offshore petroleum development. Oil companies in February bid on 2.7 million acres in the Chukchi Sea. Other lease sales are planned.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, along with its Russian counterparts, has nearly completed a comprehensive population count of walruses. The numbers are anticipated in the coming weeks, possibly by the end of the year, Woods said.

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#### ANCHORAGE, Alaska -

A conservation group is going to court to force the federal government to consider adding the Pacific walrus to the list of threatened species.

The [Center for Biological Diversity](#) sued the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) and [Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne](#) on Wednesday for failing to act on a petition seeking protection for walruses under the Endangered Species Act.

Walruses are threatened by global warming that melts Arctic sea ice, according to the group, one of the parties that successfully petitioned to list polar bears as threatened. The group also has filed petitions to protect Arctic seals.

The walrus petition was filed in February. The Fish and Wildlife Service was required by law to decide by May 8 whether the petition had merit, which would trigger a more thorough review and a preliminary decision after 12 months. The agency missed the deadline.

[Rebecca Noblin](#), an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the delay would harm walruses.

"Every day that goes by without protecting the walrus, we're emitting more greenhouse gases, accelerating the ice melt," Noblin said.

"In addition to the climate change, the other main threat is oil and gas development that continues to go forward without any consultation regarding walrus," she said.