

Conservation groups announce agreement in proposed loon listing

By Dan Joling
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska – The federal government will decide by February whether a rare loon that nests in Alaska will be listed as threatened or endangered under an agreement announced Thursday by conservation groups.

Groups that sued the Interior Department in December to protect the yellow-billed loon hope a listing will provide a roadblock to petroleum development that the groups claim threatens birds in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska west of Prudhoe Bay.

“The yellow-billed loon is one of the rarest and most vulnerable birds in the United States, and it is at risk of getting trampled in the rush to develop oil and gas in the Arctic,” said Andrea Treece, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Bruce Woods, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, said an agreement was under discussion he could but could not confirm that final details had been nailed down.

The petition was filed in April 2004. A push by the Bush administration to develop petroleum in the Arctic gave the listing an added urgency. Treece said from her office in San Francisco.

“There hasn’t been a lot of interest in looking at the impact on the species that need protecting,” she said.

David Gordon, director of Pacific Environment, said loons habitat in Russia’s Sea of Okhotsk and the Bering Sea has also been opened to oil development despite local protests.

The yellow-billed loon breeds in tundra wetlands of Alaska, Canada and Russia. The loons winter along the west coasts of Canada and the United States.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates there are 16,500 yellow-billed loons in the world, including 3,700 to 4,900 that breed in Alaska. More than 75 percent of the Alaska breeders nest in the petroleum reserve and many nest in areas recently opened to oil and gas development near Teshekpuk Lake and along the Colville River, according to conservation groups.

Smaller numbers breed on the Seward Peninsula east of the Bering Strait and on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea.

President Warren Harding created the 23-million acre petroleum reserve in 1923 as an emergency oil supply for the Navy. Current leasing plans come from a presidential directive.

Inundation of the loons’ freshwater breeding areas by rising sea levels tied to global warming is another threat, according to the groups.

The petition to list the loon was filed four year ago by four U.S. conservation groups and several Russian scientific and conservation organizations. The Interior Department was required to make an initial finding on the petition within 90 days. That did not happen until last June.

The Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council and Pacific Environment sued in December to force the agency to complete the process.