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Environmental groups sue to protect Alaskan bird

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Reuters

ANCHORAGE, Alaska - Three environmental groups filed a lawsuit on Wednesday seeking protections for a rare bird that breeds in Alaska tundra that is being eyed for new oil production.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, seeks to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the yellow-billed loon under the Endangered Species Act, a protection that the plaintiffs say is overdue.

The groups -- the Center for Biological Diversity, Natural Resources Defense Council and Pacific Environment -- said federal officials have dragged their feet while the bird's habitat in Alaska is lost to oil drilling and global warming.

"The yellow-billed loon is one of the rarest and most vulnerable birds in the United States," Andrea Treece, attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a news release. "If the loon is to survive in a warming Arctic, we need to protect its critical habitat, not open it up for oil development."

The plaintiffs, along with some Russian environmentalists, filed a petition in 2004 seeking listing for the loon. In June, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that such listing may be warranted and was under study.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman in Anchorage Bruce Woods said the agency is trying to complete the studies necessary for any listing decision. Woods would not comment directly on the lawsuit.

Of the world's approximately 16,500 yellow-billed loons, about 4,000 are in Alaska, and the vast majority of the Alaska breeding pairs are found in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

A flurry of oil exploration and development is under way in the reserve's northern rim. The Bush administration has also sought to open up one off-limits section, the ecologically sensitive but potentially oil-rich Teshekpuk Lake wetlands, to new development.

The environmental plaintiffs have filed similar lawsuits in the past over Arctic Alaska wildlife they consider threatened by oil development and global warming.

The Center for Biological Diversity and NRDC, along with Greenpeace, filed a landmark 2005 lawsuit that prompted the Bush administration to consider Endangered Species Act protections for the sea ice-dependent polar bear.

A decision on listing polar bears under the Endangered Species Act is due in January.

ConocoPhillips Inc and Anadarko Petroleum Corp are the most active oil companies in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.