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ENDANGERED SPECIES: 5 penguin species get U.S. protection

Patrick Reis, E&E reporter

The Obama administration is adding five species of penguin to the Endangered Species List.

The Humboldt, yellow-eyed, white-flippered, Fiordland crested and erect-crested penguins will be listed as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act, the service says in a notice for tomorrow’s Federal Register. The five species are all native to the Southern Hemisphere.

Environmental groups have been pushing Fish and Wildlife to list the birds since 2006, arguing that climate change is making their coastal homes inhospitable.

But Fish and Wildlife wrote that while climate change is altering penguins’ habitat, there was not enough information available to predict how those changes will affect the species. The penguins are principally threatened by other man-made changes to their habitat such as development and deforestation, the agency said.

Fish and Wildlife assigns “threatened” status to species it believes are likely to be at risk of extinction in the foreseeable future.

The agency first proposed listing the penguins in 2008 and was under court order to finalize the listings by last Friday after being sued by the Center for Biological Diversity and Turtle Island Restoration Network.

The environmental groups today released a statement applauding the listing decision but questioning its climate conclusions.

“Protecting these penguins under the Endangered Species Act gives them a renewed chance at survival,” said Shaye Wolf, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Unfortunately, in today’s finding the Obama administration failed to acknowledge climate change as a threat. This administration won’t be able to help penguins survive the climate crisis if it doesn’t admit that it’s a problem.”

Fish and Wildlife is also under court order to decide the status of the African penguin by Sept. 30 and of a population of the southern rockhopper penguin by Jan. 28, 2011.

Fish and Wildlife does not designate protected habitat zones for foreign species. Instead, the foreign listings allow the U.S. government to provide financial assistance to international conservation efforts and restrict imports and exports under the U.N. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.



Humbolt penguin. Image curtesy of Wikipedia Commons.