

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Pacific walrus may get a day in court, too

By Patti Epler

The Pacific walrus has become the latest Arctic Alaska species headed for a courtroom battle between environmentalists and the federal government under the Endangered Species Act.

The Center for Biological Diversity has notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of its intent to sue the agency for failing to list the walrus as either threatened or endangered under the law. The agency currently considers it a “candidate” species but formally listing the walrus would give it more protection from development through possible restrictions on oil and gas development, for instance.

The center is pushing the issue now because Shell Oil is seeking to drill in the Beaufort Sea in 2012, in an area the center says includes walrus habitat.

Rebecca Noblin, the center’s Alaska director, said Thursday the federal government has found that the walrus is threatened with extinction because of climate change and has placed it in a waiting list for protection.

That waiting list has been described as a “black hole” for imperiled species, according to a press release



from the center. The list has more than 250 species including some that have been there for more than 20 years. At least 24 species have gone extinct while on the waiting list, according to the release.

“The time to act to save Pacific walrus is now,” she said in the release.

In a seven-page letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Rowan Gould of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Noblin describes the deteriorating sea ice condition off the Arctic coast. Walrus use sea ice for giving birth, nursing and resting. But, as the federal agency has recognized, dwindling sea ice has led to mass mortality events in recent years as thousands of animals have been trampled as too

many of them haul out on areas of coastal sea ice that are too small. “The treats to walrus are not only imminent; they have already arrived,” Noblin wrote.

The letter gives the agency 60 days to comply with the center’s request or the conservation organization will file a lawsuit.

The Pacific walrus joins the polar bear, Cook Inlet beluga whale, ribbon seal and Steller sea lion on the list of Arctic species in Alaska that are the subject of legal action to better protect them from climate change and development.