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## Environmental group plans lawsuit to protect walrus

By Dan Joling

An environmental group gave formal notice Thursday that it will sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list Pacific walrus as a threatened or endangered species.

Rebecca Noblin of the Center for Biological Diversity in Anchorage said the group will sue to move walrus off the government agency's "warranted but precluded" list. The Fish and Wildlife Service announced in February that walrus need additional protection from the threat of climate warming but could not be added to the threatened or endangered list because other species were a higher priority.

Noblin said the agency has not demonstrated that a walrus listing is precluded by other listing proposals or that progress is being made in adding qualified species to the list. The Obama administration, she said, has acknowledged that climate change threatens the survival of the Pacific walrus but has chosen not to step in to stop their extinction.

"It's like the captain of the Titanic saying he knows the ship is about to hit an iceberg, but he's too busy filling out the paperwork to turn the wheel," she said.

A Fish and Wildlife spokesman, Bruce Woods, in February said the agency will review its decision next year but that walrus were relatively low on the list of species on the "warranted but precluded" list. He said Thursday that he cannot comment on pending litigation.

The Center for Biological Diversity in 2008 petitioned to list walrus as threatened or endangered, citing threats to walrus' sea ice habitat.



Scientists at the National Snow and Ice Data Center have tracked a steady decline in sea ice in recent decades. Climate models have projected that summer sea ice could disappear by 2030.

Alaska's walrus population spends virtually the entire winter in the Bering Sea on the edge of sea ice that forms every year. In spring, as temperatures warm, ice melts and the edge of the sea ice moves north.

Older males spend the summer in the Bering Sea, foraging from islands or remote coastal shores. Females and pups, however, ride the ice edge north as it recedes through the Bering Strait and into the Chukchi and Beaufort seas.

Females dive to the shallow continental shelf in search of clams as pups rest above them, safe from predators.

In recent years, summer sea ice has receded well beyond the continental shelf over water too deep for walrus to dive for clams. Walrus in three of the last four years congregated by the thousands on Alaska's northwest shore. Larger numbers took refuge on the Russian side of the Chukchi Sea.

The Fish and Wildlife Service was under a court-ordered deadline to decide by Jan. 31 whether to recommend walrus for listing. Listing was endorsed by the federal Marine Mammal Commission, which oversees marine mammal conservation policies carried out by federal regulatory agencies.

