

# The Bristol Bay Times

April 21st, 2011

## Feds advised of pending lawsuit over Pacific walrus

By Margaret Bauman |

A conservation organization gave the required 60-day formal notice today of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for failure to protect Pacific walrus under the Endangered Species Act.

While the federal agency on Feb. 8 designated the Pacific walrus as a “candidate” species under the Endangered Species Act, the walrus could wait indefinitely for protection.

The notice of intent to sue came from the Center for Biological Diversity in Anchorage.

Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the Center, said that the Obama administration “has acknowledged that climate change threatens the survival of the Pacific walrus, but it’s 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.”

Bruce Woods, public affairs officer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, said the agency reserves specific comment on pending or ongoing litigation.

Woods said some species end up on the ‘candidate’ list because there are other species that face more immediate threats.

“Everything is a budget issue and if funding was unlimited we could address all species that need to be addressed, but that’s not the real world,” he said.

The Pacific walrus, he said was determined to be not in as imminent danger as some other species face.

The Center for Biological Diversity in 2008 submitted a petition to list the Pacific walrus under the Endangered Species Act and sued to obtain the court deadline for a listing decision after the Fish and Wildlife Service delayed response to the petition.

Fish and Wildlife officials had a court-ordered deadline of Jan. 31 to determine whether to recommend listing the walrus as threatened or endangered.

Noblin said that if fish and wildlife officials came to them within 60 days and agreed to reconsider their decision regarding the Pacific walrus, and agree to deadlines on their decision, then the Center would not have to file a lawsuit.

Pacific walrus living off the Arctic waters off Alaska are dependent on sea ice for giving birth, nursing young and

resting. Female walrus and calves follow the sea ice year-round.

While females dive to the bottom of the shallow continental shelf to feed on clams, their calves rest on the sea ice, safe from predators.

With the decline of summer sea ice from the shallow foraging grounds, females and calves have been forced to come ashore, where calves are vulnerable to being killed by predators or trampled to death in stampedes. For three of the past four summers, thousands of walruses have congregated on Alaskan and Russian shores. Several thousand young walruses were killed in stampedes in Russia in 2007 and 133 young walruses perished in an Alaska stampede in 2009.

Pacific walrus also face threats from offshore oil drilling. Noblin said, citing proposed regulations from the Obama administration that would allow for these walrus to be harassed in the course of exploration and drilling activities in the Beaufort Sea over the next five years. Every day oil industry operations adversely affect walrus by creating

excessive noise and other disturbances, she said.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national non-profit conservation group dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.