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Lawsuit Seeks Update of Crucial Population Data for Marine Mammals

Environmental groups want the federal government to update the population data for nine subgroups of marine mammals, data used to make decisions on projects that could affect the survival of each subspecies.

SAN FRANCISCO (CN) — The federal government uses flawed, outdated data on the populations of polar bears, walruses and other marine mammals to make decisions on projects that could threaten the survival of those species, **environmental groups claim in a lawsuit filed Thursday.**

The Center for Biological Diversity and Turtle Island Restoration Network **sued the U.S. Department of Interior and Fish and Wildlife Service in federal court.** They claim Fish and Wildlife has failed to update expired population assessments for nine subspecies of sea otters, polar bears, manatees and walruses. Most of those groups are categorized as “strategic” under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, meaning the level of human-caused death could threaten the group’s survival.

The center’s attorney, Lalli Venkatakrishnan, blamed former President Donald Trump’s administration for a “reckless push to expand oil drilling” on public lands and oceans that did not properly consider science and the protection of vulnerable marine mammal populations.

“We hope the Biden administration will move quickly to update population assessments for polar bears, sea otters and other vulnerable species,” Venkatakrishnan said in a statement Thursday.

The law requires Fish and Wildlife to update population assessments annually for “strategic” subspecies and every three years for groups designated as “non-strategic.” Most assessments have not been updated since 2014. Two “strategic”-designated populations of polar bears — the Chukchi/Bering Seas and Southern Beaufort Sea subgroups — have not been updated in over a decade.

“Polar bears face increasing and persistent threats that have changed the status of both stocks since the last published stock assessments in 2009,” the environmental groups state in their 17-page complaint.

Polar bears, which depend on sea ice for survival, have seen their habitat shrink rapidly due to rising temperatures from climate change, the conservation groups complain. A National Snow and Ice Data Center [report](#) found Arctic sea ice reached the second lowest minimum ever recorded by satellite in 2020. Despite these risks, the Trump administration [opened](#) the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas exploration last year and [approved](#) a massive oil and gas

drilling project in Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve that conservationists say will harm endangered species.

Stock assessments for southwest, south-central, and southeast subgroups of Alaska northern sea otters have not been updated since 2014. Conservationists say that has led to inaccurate population data being used to justify the issuance of offshore oil and gas leases and seismic surveys in Alaska, which could threaten the recovery and survival of northern sea otters.

Southern sea otters off the coast of California face threats from food scarcity, fishing-gear-related deaths and a drastic decline in kelp abundance, according to the lawsuit. Fish and Wildlife created a draft stock assessment on southern sea otters in January 2020, but more than a year later it has yet to finalize the study.

Over the last seven years, sea ice loss and ocean acidification have led to declines in the Pacific walrus population, according to estimates cited in the lawsuit. Despite those threats, the service has not updated its stock assessment for the Pacific walrus in more than six years.

Two West Indian manatee subgroups face increasing threats from watercraft collisions, which killed at least 637 manatees in Florida's waterways in 2020. The loss of warm water refuge from climate change-induced sporadic cold fronts and algae blooms exacerbated by increasing precipitation and temperatures also threaten the manatee's survival, according to the environmental groups. Still, the service has not updated manatee stock assessments since 2014.

"Assuring a current, science-based population analyses is critical to the protection of polar bears, manatees, sea otters and other magnificent animals," said Todd Steiner, executive director at Turtle Island Restoration Network, in a statement Thursday. "This lawsuit will clean up the environmental catastrophe caused by former President Trump and ensure marine mammals throughout the United States get the protection they need to survive and recover."

The lawsuit seeks a court order directing the service to update stock assessments for nine subspecies of sea otters, polar bears, manatees and walruses by "dates certain."

The groups are represented by Venkatakrishnan and Miyoko Sakashita, both lawyers with the Center for Biological Diversity.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokesperson Laury Marshall declined to comment on the litigation.