

ARCTIC

Trump admin proposes habitat protections for seals

[Kylie Mohr](#), E&E News reporter

NOAA Fisheries announced two revised [proposed rules](#) today that would designate critical habitat for ringed and bearded seals.

The proposed habitat areas would encompass sweeping portions of the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort seas. Critical habitat areas require special management and protection, and once established, federal agencies cannot authorize, fund or carry out actions that are likely to destroy or adversely modify the habitat.

The proposed rules, updated with additional research since 2014, acknowledge climate change as the species' dominant challenge for survival, stating the loss of sea ice is the "principal threat" to their continued existence. Both bearded and ringed seals give birth on top of sea ice and depend on the ice and snowpack to hunt for food and raise their young.

The proposed rule is specifically for the Beringia distinct population segment of bearded seals.

Protections for the ringed seal have been up for debate in recent years, as the Alaska Oil and Gas Association and the American Petroleum Institute have thrown their support behind lessening restrictions.

NOAA Fisheries rejected a petition by the state of Alaska, the Arctic Slope Regional Corp. and others to delist the Arctic ringed seal in November, but it says it's initiating a five-year review to investigate further ([Greenwire](#), Nov. 30, 2020).

The Center for Biological Diversity sued to force the critical habitat designations, saying they are long overdue in the face of climate change. CBD also petitioned to protect both species in 2008, before the Obama administration listed them as threatened in 2012.

"These vital habitat protections will help these adorable seals have a shot at surviving our rapidly warming world, but we need to do much more," Emily Jeffers, an attorney at CBD, said in a press release. "Melting sea ice poses a dire threat to these ice-dependent seals."

Waters near proposed onshore drilling in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would be included.

"The proposed rules underscore the recklessness of Trump's push to open the Arctic to more oil drilling," Jeffers said. "Ringed and bearded seals will disappear forever if we don't drastically reduce our carbon emissions."