



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Region 7 - Alaska

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News

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Pacific Walrus to be Designated a Candidate for Endangered Species Protection

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has determined that the Pacific walrus warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but an official rulemaking to propose that protection is currently precluded by the need to address other higher priority species. As a result, the walrus will be added to the agency's list of candidates for ESA protection and its future status will be reviewed annually.

The Service's determination – also known as a 12-month finding – that sufficient scientific and commercial data exist to warrant protecting the Pacific walrus under the ESA was made after a comprehensive review of the best available scientific information concerning the walrus and the threats it faces. This review found that the walrus is primarily threatened by the loss of sea ice in its arctic habitat due to climate change.

“The threats to the walrus are very real, as evidenced by this ‘warranted’ finding,” said Geoff Haskett, the Service's Director of the Alaska Region. “But its greater population numbers and ability to adapt to land-based haulouts make its immediate situation less dire than those facing other species such as the polar bear. If we work with Alaska Native groups, the State of Alaska and other partners to help the walrus now, we may be able to lessen the long-term impacts of climate change on these animals and keep them from becoming endangered.”

While candidate species do not receive protection under the ESA, Pacific walrus in the U.S. are currently protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972. Protections afforded under the MMPA are similar to those under the Endangered Species Act and include prohibitions on the harvest, import, export, and interstate commerce of the Pacific walrus or walrus products.

The Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) is found throughout the continental shelf waters of the Bering and Chukchi seas and occasionally in the East Siberian Sea and the Beaufort Sea. Pacific

walrus use floating sea ice as a substrate for birthing and nursing calves, resting, isolation from predators and for passive transport to new feeding areas. The Service has concluded that loss of sea ice – with the resulting changes to walrus distribution and life history patterns this loss entails – will lead to a population decline and is a threat to Pacific walrus in the foreseeable future.

While dependent on sea ice, Pacific walrus have shown an ability to use land-based haulouts when sea ice is unavailable, and to use those haulouts to rest between feeding periods offshore. Over time, walrus will be forced to rely on terrestrial haulouts to a greater extent. This will expose all individuals, but especially calves, juveniles, and females, to increased levels of stress from depletion of prey, increased energetic costs to obtain prey, trampling injuries and mortalities, and predation. While current subsistence harvest of Pacific walrus by Alaska natives is believed to be sustainable, if sea ice loss occurs as expected, the current level of subsistence harvest will become a threat in the foreseeable future.

The precise current size and current trends in the number of the Pacific walrus is unknown. The last joint U.S./Russian survey was conducted in 2006 using thermal imaging systems and satellite transmitters. The number of Pacific walrus within the surveyed area was estimated at 129,000. This is considered a minimum estimate, since weather conditions forced an early end to the survey and not much of the southwest Bering Sea was completed.

The Service will review the Pacific walrus' status as a candidate species annually, and develop a proposed rule to protect the species under the ESA as priorities allow. Any future proposal to add the Pacific walrus to the federal list of threatened and endangered species will be subject to public review and comment.

On February 8, 2008, the Service received a petition dated February 7, 2008, from the Center for Biological Diversity to list the Pacific walrus as threatened or endangered under the ESA and to designate critical habitat. On September 10, 2009, the Service published a 90-day finding stating that substantial scientific or commercial information indicated that the petitioned action may be warranted due to effects on walrus resulting from changes in climate and sea-ice habitats. Today's publication constitutes the 12-month finding on the February 7, 2008, petition to list the Pacific walrus as endangered or threatened.

The 12-month finding and other background information is available on the internet at <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/esa.htm> or by contacting the Service's Anchorage Regional Office at 907-786-3800 or 800-362-5148.

America's fish, wildlife and plant resources belong to all of us, and ensuring the health of imperiled species is a shared responsibility. We're working to actively engage conservation partners and the public in the search for improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species. To learn more about the Endangered Species program, go to <http://www.fws.gov/angered/>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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