

# Marine mammal managers agree to update population counts

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska—Federal marine mammal managers have agreed to deadlines for updated population estimates of four species threatened by global warming—polar bears, walrus, sea otters and manatees.

The agreement settles a lawsuit filed in San Francisco by two conservation groups.

Updates to "stock assessments" are required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, said Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco.

"They're used to make to make management decisions about those species," she said.

Rosa Meehan, regional marine mammals supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, said the law requires the counts to evaluate the effect on fisheries.

Sakashita said counts also are cited in oil and gas development authorizations and used it to calculate negligible impact. If they are not used in other management decisions, they should be, she said, given the rapidly changing conditions in the Arctic.

"Times have changed since the last stock assessments, and the Arctic sea ice habitat of the walrus and polar bear is melting away," she said. "Yet the Department of the Interior continues to hand out permits to the oil industry as if it were living in the past."

Stock assessments include information on the range of the species and threats, said center attorney Brendan Cummings, and should be revised to reflect changes year to year.

The law requires revisions every year for endangered marine mammals and every three years for other species, Sakashita said.

Sea otters and manatees were last assessed in 1995, she said. The most current management decisions on the Alaska species were done in 2002.

Meehan said the assessments were not updated because the agency had no new significant information to add. Other Alaska priorities took over, Meehan said.

"If we had enough money to do everything we were told to do, everything would be on time," she said.

Alaska managers face harsh Arctic conditions in assessing walrus and polar bears. For Chukchi and Bering Sea populations, shared with Russia, there are also diplomacy hurdles.

The last complete survey for walrus, an animal spread thin over hundreds of miles of harsh territory, was done in 1990, Meehan said.

"The information is so old, we don't even use it anymore," she said.

Walrus spend winters on Bering Sea ice south of St. Lawrence Islands. Females and young walrus spread out along the ice edge as it recedes north in the summer and thousands haul out on the Russian coast.

Work on a new walrus count with Russian scientists, a project that cost \$2 million, is nearing completion but a final analysis of the information may not be completed until early 2009.

A count of Beaufort Sea polar bears released in 2006 estimated the population at 1,526, down from a previous estimate of 1,800 bears. Researchers, however, said the study used different counting methods and the two estimates could not be statistically differentiated.

As for Chukchi-Bering bears, there has never been a comprehensive count, Meehan said, only estimates built largely on inferential data such as the number of females in denning sites.

The settlement requires revised stock assessments for California, Washington and three stocks of Alaska sea otters in 2008. New reports will be required in early 2009 for Pacific walrus, the two Alaska polar bear stocks, the Florida manatee, and the Antillean manatee in Puerto Rico.

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