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NOAA Will Not List Two Spotted Seals Populations as Endangered or Threatened

NOAA's Fisheries Service today announced that two of three populations totaling more than 200,000 spotted seals in and near Alaska are not currently in danger of extinction or likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. The announcement follows an 18-month status review.

However, NOAA is proposing to list a third smaller population of 3,300 seals off China and Russia as threatened.

"The northern two spotted seal populations exceed 200,000 individuals. We do not predict the expected fluctuations in sea ice will affect them enough to warrant listing at this time," said Doug Mecum, acting administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service Alaska region.

Spotted seals have three distinct populations. The 100,000-strong Bering Sea population segment lives near Kamchatka and in the Gulf of Anadyr in Russia and in the eastern Bering Sea in United States waters. Another distinct population segment of roughly 100,000 seals has breeding populations in both the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk. The southern-most population of about 3,300 seals is centered in Liaodong Bay, China and Peter the Great Bay, Russia.

Spotted seals prefer arctic or sub-arctic waters and are often found within the outer margins of shifting ice floes. During breeding season, spotted seals haul out on ice floes, while during the summer months they can be found in the open ocean or hauled out on shore.

Climate change may alter these three populations' habitats. Experts expect that large year-to-year fluctuations in sea ice will continue within the Bering and Okhotsk seas, and spotted seals in these two populations may move north in search of suitable habitat in years when the ice is reduced. Also, spotted seals are known to breed and whelp on land when ice conditions are poor. However, such breeding sites are limited and may expose seals to increased hunting and predation.

The two northern populations are large, have many offspring, and have a broad distribution, diminishing their need for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

For the southern population, lower winds and warmer temperatures will likely cause a decline in sea ice large enough to harm the population. Because of its smaller size and vulnerability as a southern species to the potential lack of ice, NOAA decided to list the third population in China and Russia. This means they may be in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future. The importation of these animals or their parts into the U.S. would be regulated under the Endangered Species Act.

The Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental organization, petitioned to have spotted seals listed under the Endangered Species Act in 2007, expressing concern for the species' habitat from climate warming and loss of sea ice.

In all, NOAA was petitioned to list four types of seals under the Endangered Species Act—ribbon, spotted, bearded and ringed. NOAA determined that ribbon seals should not be listed in 2008. Decisions on the bearded and ringed seals are expected next year.

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On the Web:

Alaska ice seals:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice.htm>

Proposed rule:

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/species/spottedseal_proposedrule.pdf

- 30 -