Environmentalists Push Climate Change Suits On Behalf Of Kids

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By Jessica Robinson

EUGENE, Ore. - Environmental lawyers are trying a new legal tactic, hoping to force the government to take more aggressive steps against global warming. They're bringing lawsuits on behalf of kids -- including young plaintiffs in the Northwest. The cases use a legal theory put forth by a University of Oregon professor.

Nelson Kanuk is a 16 year old from Kipnuk, Alaska. It's a small coastal village that's partially encircled by wall of sea ice.

Nelson Kanuk: "When it's packed together it acts as a natural barrier from the storms and also in the springtime that sea ice acts as a save haven for the seals."

But Kanuk says the ice is melting -- threatening the future of the village and its traditional seal harvest.

Kanuk spoke at an environmental law conference in Eugene about a lawsuit he's brought against the state of Alaska. It's one of a dozen coordinated cases that seek to force state and federal agencies to reduce carbon emissions. University of Oregon law professor Mary Wood argues, just like waterways, the atmosphere falls into the public trust.

Mary Wood: "The people own critical natural resources in common. And that means the government cannot allow damage to the resources that would compromise the public's ability to thrive."

It's unclear whether the theory will gain traction in the courts. So far, lower-court judges have said they don't have the authority to mandate reductions in carbon emissions.

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