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Global warming threatens tiny critter, lawsuit charges

BY LES BLUMENTHAL

Compared to the polar bear, the American pika is downright tiny.

Weighing only 4 ounces to 6 ounces, this small, rabbit-like mammal with thick brown hair that lives on boulder-covered slopes near alpine meadows in Western mountain ranges, could represent the latest effort to use the Endangered Species Act to combat global warming.

Environmentalists filed a lawsuit Tuesday in U.S. district court in Sacramento, Calif., to force the Bush administration to decide whether to list the pika for protection under the act. The lawsuit claims the animal is threatened by rising temperatures and says the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has dragged its feet for months on whether to list it.

In May, the polar bear was protected as a threatened species under the act. But Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne made clear at the time that the Endangered Species Act was not intended to regulate global climate change.

Kempthorne said it would be "inappropriate" to use the Endangered Species Act to control greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles, power plants and other sources. He said the polar bear listing would be accompanied by "administrative guidance" and an administrative rule to limit any unintended harm to the U.S. economy.

Environmentalists dispute the White House approach.

"We disagree with the administration that the Endangered Species Act isn't a perfectly appropriate act to address global warming," said Greg Loarie of Earthjustice, an environmental legal firm representing the Center for Biological Diversity in the lawsuit.

Loarie said the pika, which is intolerant of high temperatures, is an appropriate animal to test their contention. "The pika is very much the polar bear of the Lower 48," he said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service had no comment on the lawsuit.

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