

Groups sue seeking documents connected to Chukchi Sea sale

1/28/2008, 6:50 p.m. EST

By DAN JOLING

The Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Conservation groups on Monday sued the federal agency responsible for the upcoming offshore petroleum lease sale in the Chukchi Sea off Alaska's northwest coast, claiming the federal government has not disclosed documents that could show harmful effects to polar bears and other marine mammals.

The groups said the documents could reveal that the Minerals Management Service's plans for the outer continental shelf sale are ill-advised and possibly illegal.

"Hiding critical documents about the potential harm to polar bears from drilling their habitat is symptomatic of the administration's head-in-the-sand approach to global warming and the melting of the Arctic," said Brendan Cummings, ocean program director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Christine Huffaker, MMS-Alaska Freedom of Information Act officer, said Monday she had not seen the lawsuit and could not comment.

The lease sale is scheduled for Feb. 6 in Anchorage.

The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court of New York's Southern District by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Center for Biological Diversity.

The lease sale will make available nearly 46,000 square miles for petroleum leases. The sale has been condemned by environmental groups that contend industrial activity will harm northern marine mammals. They say the sale in an area nearly the size of Pennsylvania was planned without information as basic as the polar bear and walrus populations.

The MMS is part of the Interior Department, as is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is considering listing polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act because of the effect of global warming on Arctic sea ice, the main habitat of the polar bear.

Conservation groups said they asked the MMS for documents pertaining to the lease sale for several months before resorting to a lawsuit.

Besides polar bears, the Chukchi is used by endangered bowhead whales, threatened eider ducks, gray whales, walrus, seals and marine birds.

The groups want the agency to release e-mail communications that they say demonstrates that the MMS may have understated the potential development that might occur as a result of the Chukchi Sea lease sale. The groups claim the agency failed to analyze, for example, liquefied natural gas facilities and tanker traffic in the Chukchi Sea and the Bering Sea to the south.

The groups claim there are no effective methods for cleaning oil spills in broken ice.

"If the true impacts of oil development in the Chukchi Sea were made public and properly analyzed, the area would be protected, not opened up for oil development," said Chuck Clusen of the Natural Resources Defense Council.