

Greenpeace calls for better protection of marine mammals

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Anchorage, Alaska - Polar bears in Alaska are now in the middle of a legal battle. Today, three environmental groups, including Greenpeace, filed a lawsuit against the federal government, demanding that the Bush administration take steps to protect the marine mammals.

The lawsuit contends global warming is destroying the Arctic ice pack that polar bears depend upon to live. But while scientists may not agree on why the ice is melting, they say there's evidence that its loss may be taking a toll on the bears.

A television commercial airing in several big cities in the Lower 48 cites that polar bears may become extinct because of global warming. The spot, produced by Greenpeace, is part of a campaign the environmental group is waging to protect the sea ice that polar bears need in order to live. Another part of its campaign happened today when the environmental group filed a lawsuit against the federal government.

"The lawsuit is being filed to get protection for polar bears under the Endangered Species Act," said Melanie Duchin, Greenpeace.

Duchin and Greenpeace say global warming created by

pollution is causing the Arctic ice pack to melt.

"We're using the suit as a way to protect the polar bears and also to try and force the Bush administration to take action to deal with global warming and reduce greenhouse gas pollution," said Duchin.

While the jury is still out on why the ice is melting, recent and current scientific studies agree that it is disappearing.

"In the past there was more loose pack ice in the area and now during September, there's a lower amount, more open water," said Dr. Cleve Cowles, Minerals Management Service (right).

Cowles is a scientist with the federal government. He says in recent years he and his staff have made observations in the Alaska Arctic that they've never seen before.

"In 2004, following a storm, four bear carcasses were observed," said Cowles.

According to Cowles, the bears were apparent drowning victims.

"It probably has to do with the increasing distance that we've seen with sea ice from the northern coast of Alaska in the late summer," said Dr. Steve

Amstrup, U.S. Geological Survey biologist (above left).

Amstrup is a polar bear expert with the U.S. Geological Survey. His agency has done satellite telemetry work to show how pack ice in the Beaufort Sea is receding more and more in recent years. Colored symbols (shown at right) signify radio-collared polar bears, and it shows that they follow the ice as it moves farther from shore.

"We're concerned that bears that are forced to spend parts of the summer very far off shore, might be in areas where the hunting is less productive and that might be causing environmental stress, nutritional stress," said Amstrup.

Right now there is no data available that shows how the dwindling ice pack in the Alaska Arctic is impacting polar bears. However, there is research from Canada. Amstrup recently assisted Canadian biologists in a study of polar bears in Hudson Bay, where the ice is also receding. The bear population there has dropped 22 percent in the past two decades.

"That earlier sea ice melt is driving a lower survival of principally young animals and the very old animals. And that lower survival is apparently driving a declining population," said Amstrup.

Only further research will tell if the same thing is happening in Alaska. In the meantime, Greenpeace will try to rally public support on behalf of polar bears.

“To see them as the canary in the coal mine, that we’re going to lose this great species, if we don’t deal with global warming,” said Duchin (left).

Answers being sought by scientists and now the courts.

Amstrup says next year he’ll have results of a six-year study his agency has been conducting on polar bears in Alaska. He says that will give them a base line to work from to determine how the polar bear population is faring in Alaska.

Scientists in Alaska are concerned about the polar bear

population here. In fact Steve Amstrup says in June polar bear specialists with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature was presented the research results from the Hudson Bay study. Based on that information the group decided to reclassify polar bears from a species of less concern to vulnerable status. A year from now the USGS will have a much better idea on how polar bears in Alaska are faring.