

## Greens Question Administration's Commitment to Science

By Adriel Bettelheim | March 27, 2009 12:04 PM |

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The Obama administration's much-touted commitment to science took a bit of a hit this week, when the Interior Department ruled on whether the yellow-billed loon deserves protection under the Endangered Species Act.



The Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday declared the bird a threatened or endangered species, essentially acknowledging that available studies suggest it's in danger of becoming extinct. But the agency also announced that it would indefinitely delay listing it as such so it could focus on higher-priority actions.

This didn't go over well with environmentalists, who had grown weary of similar "precluded" rulings issued by the Bush administration's Interior Department.

What particularly incensed the green movement is the loon's habitat includes tundra wetlands in Alaska that are prime targets for oil and gas drilling. Only last year, Gov. Sarah Palin sued the Interior Department over a finding that polar bears are threatened species. Some quietly wondered whether the Obama administration essentially threw the loon under a bus, relegating it to administrative purgatory to avoid a high-profile showdown with the ex-Republican vice presidential candidate and not appear to be hindering domestic energy production?

"The fact that other species are also in trouble is hardly an excuse for inaction," said Charles Clusen, director of the Alaska Project of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Since the Fish and Wildlife Service shares our deep concerns about the survival of the yellow-billed loon, it is time to work to protect this rare species, not look the other way."

The Center for Biological Diversity says 252 species are currently considered candidates for listing; some have been on the wait list for 20 years. Interior can only delay a listing if it shows it's making progress listing other species. But, the center notes, Interior has only listed two domestic species in the past 35 months: the polar bear and a rare Hawaiian plant, which was designated as threatened last week.

Interior officials say they have limited staff and resources to rank all of the candidate species. But conservationists say the decision raises broader questions about the administration's embrace of sound science.

"Unfortunately, in denying protection to the yellow-billed loon, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar has adopted as his own one of the least defensible anti-wildlife policies of the Bush administration," said Brendan Cummings, a lawyer with the biological diversity center.