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8. ENDANGERED SPECIES: Another lawsuit filed to block polar bear listing

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California property-rights advocates announced plans today to sue the federal government to block protection of the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act.

The Pacific Legal Foundation -- representing the California Cattlemen's Association, the California Forestry Association and Congress of Racial Equality -- plans to file a lawsuit challenging the Interior Department's basis for listing the bear: future threats from climate change.

The groups say sea ice models that Interior used as the basis for its listing are not the "best available science" and argue the listing is unnecessary and arbitrary since current polar bear populations are healthy and already protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The groups sent a "60-day notice" to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the first step in legal action.

Interior listed the polar bear as a threatened species in May. The U.S. Geological Survey has said that shrinking sea ice could eliminate two-thirds of the world's polar bears -- and all of Alaska's bears -- in the next 50 years. Polar bears rely on sea ice to hunt, mate and make dens for their young.

There are currently 20,000 to 25,000 polar bears -- twice as many as there were in the 1970s.

The lawsuit is the latest in a pile of legal complaints on all aspects of the listing. Alaska officials filed a similar lawsuit in May, charging insufficient evidence to support listing the bear. And a hunting group has sued to maintain the right for U.S. hunters to bring polar bear trophies from Canadian hunts.

The Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups have three legal complaints against the Bush administration's polar bear rules. One attempts to force more stringent protections of the bear, and another requests a new assessment of oil and gas industry actions that could affect the bear's Alaska habitat.

The center also sued over the decision to allow oil and gas companies to unintentionally harass or harm polar bears. Environmental and Alaska native groups filed two other lawsuits on activity related to oil and gas leases before the bear was listed.

The Pacific Legal Foundation lawsuit will be filed in federal court in Alaska, the group said.

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