

Palin, Bush Remain at Odds Over Polar Bears, Kempthorne Says

By Jim Efstathiou Jr.

Alaska Governor Sarah Palin's opposition to listing polar bears as a protected species hasn't shaken the Bush administration's support for the action, Interior Department Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said.

"I'll stand by the decision," Kempthorne said today in an interview. "The sea ice is the habitat for the polar bear. My conclusion was that I needed to proceed with listing them as threatened."

Palin sued the Bush administration last month over the decision, shortly before she was selected as Republican presidential nominee John McCain's running mate.

The listing of polar bears as threatened recognizes that they depend on sea ice for survival, and that computer models show that sea ice will decline in the future, Kempthorne said.

Palin has questioned scientific conclusions that human activity is contributing to higher temperatures and sea levels. The state believes the "decision to list the polar bear was not based on the best scientific and commercial data available," she said in announcing Alaska's lawsuit.

The suit, filed in Washington, D.C., claims the federal analysis didn't adequately consider polar bear survival through earlier warming periods centuries ago.

Kempthorne said he reached the decision in May to protect polar bears under the Endangered Species Act after consulting with Palin. The Alaska governor offered "a very articulate letter" expressing that state's views and the issues she raised were used as guidelines in the decision-making process, he said.

Dissatisfied Environmentalists

The administration's decision failed to satisfy some environmentalists who said language in the ruling means continued oil and gas development. Kempthorne said that the ruling should not be used as a "back door" to regulate greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, the byproduct of burning coal and oil.

"You cannot make a scientific, causal conclusion that an emission in the lower 48 is causing this adverse impact to the polar bear," Kempthorne said. "We're not the regulatory agency that determines what you do with climate change."

The Bush administration has listed

60 species for protection under law compared to 522 under President Bill Clinton and 231 under President George H.W. Bush, said Noah Greenwald, science director for the Center for Biological Diversity. Between passage of the law in 1974 and 2000, an average 47 species a year have received protected status.

Shutting Down Program

"They've completely shut down the program for protecting these species," Greenwald said yesterday in an interview. "Past administrations were protecting far more species."

More groups could receive federal protection before the end of the year, Kempthorne said.

"I don't believe that you've seen the last species listed by this department," he said.

Kempthorne also announced today that his department will allow 30 additional days for the public to comment on rules proposed in August that change the way federal agencies review projects under the Endangered Species Act.

Representative Nick Rahall, a Democrat who chairs the House

Natural Resources Committee, sought the extension. The comment period will now end on Oct. 15.

“This incredibly controversial proposal, which could have far-reaching implications on the future

integrity of the Endangered Species program, clearly merits more public scrutiny,” Rahall said in a statement.

The changes would give “federal agencies an unacceptable degree

of discretion to decide whether or not to comply with the Endangered Species Act,” Rahall said.