

Conservation groups threaten to sue White House over Arctic oil, gas leasing

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WASHINGTON – Conservation groups are threatening to file a lawsuit against the Bush administration for failing to take steps to better protect the polar bear from the effects of offshore oil and gas development in the Arctic.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Pacific Environment on Monday notified Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne of their intention to sue over the department's decision to hold oil and gas lease sales in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas without considering the impact on polar bear habitat.

In May, Kempthorne listed the polar bear as a threatened species due to the loss of sea ice caused by warming temperatures in the Arctic.

But the decision came with a catch; Kempthorne issued a special rule barring the use of the Endangered Species Act from being used to regulate greenhouse gas emissions -- the primary cause of global warming.

Under the rule, any company or project that complied with the Marine Mammal Protection Act would also meet

Interior spokesman Shane Wolfe said it was the department's policy not to comment on pending litigation. Wolfe declined further comment.