

# US government 'failing to protect polar bears'

By Tom Leonard in New York

Last Updated: 12:01amBST11/06/2008

Two conservation groups say they will sue the US government for not doing enough to protect polar bears from the effects of oil exploration and drilling off Alaska's coast.

The Centre for Biological Diversity and Pacific Environment said the Interior Department is violating the Endangered Species Act by exempting oil companies exploring the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas from further regulation.

Last month, polar bears were given protected status when they were listed as threatened by Dirk Kempthorne, the Interior Secretary.

However, Mr Kempthorne specified that the declining amount of sea ice - which the bears use for mating, denning and hunting - was caused by the warming Arctic climate and not by oil development.

But environmental groups do not agree. With soaring petrol prices now the biggest single economic issue for many Americans, the government has been under intense pressure to free up Alaska for oil exploration.

The state's outer continental shelf was long thought too remote and costly to drill. BP and Shell are among those investing heavily in Alaskan exploration.

The conservationists claim the Bush administration has been so keen to grant offshore drilling leases that they have not given proper consideration to the potential harm to polar bears.

"The only thing keeping pace with the drastic melting of the Arctic sea ice is the breakneck speed with which the Department of the Interior is rushing to sell off polar bear habitat for fossil fuel development," said Brendan Cummings, the oceans programme director for the Centre for Biological Diversity.

In their 60-day notice of their intent to sue filed on Monday, the environment groups said the Interior Department must take steps to curb oil development's impact on the bears.

They are at risk from noise and other disturbances caused by ships, aircraft and drilling platforms, the deafening blasts of seismic tests, and multiple oil and chemical spills, the conservationists said.

A spokesman for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which regulates polar bears, said it was too early to comment on the legal move.