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## E-mail reveals state dispute over polar bear listing

POLAR BEAR LISTING: Biologists disagreed with administration.

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The state's marine mammal scientists agreed last year with federal researchers who concluded polar bears are threatened with extinction because of a shrinking ice cap.

A newly released e-mail from last fall shows that the state's own biologists were at odds with the Palin administration, which has consistently opposed any new federal protections for polar bears under the Endangered Species Act.

The state's in-house dispute seems to refute later statements by Gov. Sarah Palin that a "comprehensive review" of the federal science by state wildlife officials found no reason to support an endangered-species listing for the northern bears. The governor invoked the state's own scientific work both in a cover letter to the state's official polar bear comments, and in an opinion piece published in the New York Times.

The e-mail was released this month to a University of Alaska scientist who had filed a public records request seeking information on the state's polar bear decision-

making. Rick Steiner, the university Marine Advisory Program professor who obtained the memo, said it undermines the Palin administration's scientific defense as well as its claims to being an open government.

Legal jousting over polar bear science is growing more intense with each new lawsuit this month. The Endangered Species Act -- with its potential for imposing new regulations on industry here and in the Lower 48 -- is all hinged to what researchers say is likely to happen in the future to the bears and the polar ice cap.

The state has concentrated its critique of the federal science on long-range computer models of ice drawn up by international research teams. But the state Department of Fish and Game has also challenged federal polar bear biologists who predicted the loss of two-thirds of the world's bears -- and all of Alaska's -- by the year 2050.

Environmentalists accuse the state of ignoring a broad scientific consensus about the bears' prospects in a warming world. Even a reluctant Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said earlier this month he was convinced by the federal studies and classified the bear as

threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

"I read the letter from the governor," Kempthorne said of Palin at his May 14 announcement. "I read what her biologist had submitted, the official questions raised by Alaska. I wanted to be satisfied that we could answer every one of those questions, and I am satisfied."

### PALIN PLANS TO FILE SUIT

The state continues to insist that researchers are divided over the fate of the bears. Too much scientific uncertainty remains to justify a listing, state officials say.

Palin announced Wednesday she plans to sue over Kempthorne's decision to list the bear, saying it had been based on "the unproven long-term impact of any future climate change on the species." Meanwhile legislative leaders are promoting a state-funded conference and promotion campaign aimed at publicizing what they say are important differences of scientific opinion. A \$2 million appropriation for the conference survived Palin's veto pen on Friday.

"The key would be to invite the competing viewpoints and allow for a credible outcome," wrote Sen. Lyda Green and Rep. John Harris,

the Republican leaders of the state Senate and House, in a newspaper op-ed column last week.

State officials have expressed particular concern that a threatened-species listing gives environmentalists more leverage to oppose oil and gas development in Arctic Alaska and poses risks to Native subsistence.

The state's efforts to raise contrary scientific arguments have been met with derision by some environmentalists, who liken it to efforts from the tobacco industry to raise questions about the dangers of smoking and delay regulatory action.

"The conference is like debating the theory of gravity while falling out of an airplane," said Kassie Siegel, the lead polar bear attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, which has sued the federal government to protect the bears with limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

Steiner spent five months trying to get information about how the state reached its position, saying he suspected biologists were overruled for political considerations. He said last week it's ridiculous for the state to promote a conference on polar bear science while refusing to release its own experts' scientific opinions on the issue.

"Even the petroleum-loving Bush administration couldn't find a way around the science on this issue," Steiner said. "This perpetual denial of environmental harm posture is what gives Alaska a very bad image nationally and globally."

## DIFFERENT OPINIONS

In its final response to Steiner this month, the state generally withheld all substantive in-house comments on the bears, saying these were private policy discussions among executive officials, a category exempt from release under state public records laws.

But the state did release, among nondescript cover- e-mails discussing deadlines and the state's scientific credibility, an Oct. 9 e-mail from Robert Small, head of the marine mammals program for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Small named two other marine

## Global warming's threat to polar bears

### Sea ice and polar bears

Sea ice extent in the fall of 2007 dwindled to the lowest level since satellite measurements began in 1979. The sea ice extent at the end of summer melting was 1.7 million square miles, compared to the 1979-2000 median of 2.7 million square miles. The greatest loss has been north of Siberia and Alaska coasts. Over most of their range, polar bears hunt and feed on ice year-round, visiting land for only short periods. The bears' summer habitat - the shelves of summer sea ice that allow them to hunt seals - is disappearing because of global warming.

### Alaska's polar bears

The state's polar bears come from two areas (see map below). The Chukchi Sea bears roam between Alaska and the Russian Far East coasts. The southern Beaufort Sea bears cover a wide swath of the Alaska and Canada coastline and waters.

■ **Size:** Males stand 8-11 feet tall, leave a 10-inch-wide footprint and weigh 500 to 1,000. Females are smaller, usually 400 to 700 pounds.

■ **Life span:** 25 to 30 years.

■ **Natural history:** Polar bears follow sea ice and ringed seals, their primary prey. They also eat bearded seals, whales and carrion. They do not hibernate.

■ **Breeding:** Female bears reach breeding age at 3 to 5 years and typically have two cubs every three to four years, one of the slowest reproductive rates of any mammal.

■ **Denning:** Females den on land or sea ice.



LOCATION	(YEAR)	ESTIMATED POPULATION
1.	Chukchi Sea (1993)	2,000
2.	Southern Beaufort Sea (2006)	1,500
Total		3,500



Ringed seal, primary prey



Polar bear photos courtesy of MARY SAGE, JOSEPH NAPAQTUQ SAGE

Sources: National Sea Ice Data Center, USGS, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, Ringed seal photo by BRENDAN P. KELLY / Associated Press

RON ENGSTROM / Anchorage Daily News

mammal biologists on staff and said the three of them had reviewed the nine new polar bear studies that the federal government was citing to justify a threatened-species listing for the bears.

“Overall, we believe that the methods and analytical approaches used to examine the currently available information supports the primary conclusions and inferences stated in these 9 reports,” Small wrote.

None of the three is a polar bear specialist. The state has none, having relinquished its polar bear research to the federal government.

Ken Taylor, the deputy commissioner of Fish and Game, said on Friday that it’s no secret that not everyone in his department agreed with the state’s position. “We have a lot of different opinions out there,” he said.

But the state’s main concern was with global-warming computer models, and less with the consequences for the bears, he said. That means critiques from climatologists and forecasters were more important than from marine mammal biologists, he said.

“The primary focus of the state comments has been on being able

to reliably predict the extent of September sea ice 45 years from now,” Taylor said Friday.

The state has argued that polar bear populations are currently at an all-time high and are well-managed. Even so, the state agrees that loss of sea ice is a concern, Taylor said. He said the state has offered to share its field researchers and facilities with federal biologists now seeking more information on the fate of the bears.