

ADN Blog: Alaska Politics

Congressional delegation: Not happy

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From David Hulen in Anchorage --

The congressional delegation is reacting strongly to the Bush administration's polar bear announcement. They don't like it. Neither do some environmentalists.

Here's a [video](#) from Sen. Ted Stevens' office today. *"This is the California extreme environmentalists who've decided to use the polar bear as an example of global warming. They're gonna say this is global warming. It has nothing to do with global warming. This is a concept called climate change. It is a concept of a process that's been going on for years....This species is not endangered."*

Here's the statement put out today by Stevens' office (followed by statements from Sen. Lisa Murkowski, Rep. Don Young, Gov. Sarah Palin and others)

Senator Stevens Reacts to Polar Bear Listing

Says that he is “disappointed and disturbed” by ruling

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) today released the following statement in response to the Department of the Interior’s decision to list polar bears as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act.

“I am disappointed and disturbed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s decision to weaken the Endangered Species Act by listing the polar bear as threatened despite the steady increase in the species’ population. Scientists have observed that there are now three times as many polar bears in the Arctic than there were in the 1970s.

“Never before has a species been listed as endangered or threatened while occupying its entire geographic range.

“This decision was made without any research demonstrating dangerously low population levels in polar bears, but rather on speculation regarding how ice levels will affect Arctic wildlife. Worse yet, today’s decision cannot and will not do anything to reverse sea ice decline.

“Instead, this action by the Fish and Wildlife Service sets a dangerous precedent with far-reaching social and economic ramifications. It opens the door for many other Arctic species to be listed, which would severely hamper Alaska’s ability to tap its vast natural resources. Reinterpreting the Endangered Species Act in this way is an unequivocal victory for extreme environmentalists who want to block all development in our state.

“The manipulation of the Endangered Species Act was highlighted by Kassie Siegel, the lawyer who wrote the legal petition for the Center for Biological Diversity. Ms. Siegel made no attempt to disguise her group’s intent when she said

that the effort to list the polar bears was to ‘try to make the point that global warming is not some future threat’. This statement confirms that these fringe environmentalists are simply using the polar bears to advance their extreme agenda.

“This abuse of Endangered Species law will have a devastating impact on the entire nation through endless litigation and regulation. It will ultimately weaken the Act itself, which has been one of our nation’s most valuable tools for conserving wildlife.

“Alaskans must now stand together and fight attempts to exploit the public’s fear of climate change as a means to impose unreasonable burdens in our state. The future of Alaska will depend on it.”

From Sen. Lisa Murkowski:

Senator murkowski opposes listing polar bear as threatened species

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senator Lisa Murkowski today issued the following statement on Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne’s listing of the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act:

“I can’t express how extremely disappointed I am that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has chosen to list the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. I believe it is grossly premature, even with qualifications, to recommend this action based on highly variable climate change models and projected impacts of loss of summer sea ice on a currently healthy population.

Alaska’s and most nations’ polar bear stocks are at near modern record levels. A listing decision based purely on speculation about the future, lack of existing data, and in the absence of better research on bear prey species populations, sets a truly dangerous precedent for listings of a host of wildlife species. Such a decision threatens the integrity of the entire Act and could prove far worse for wildlife protection in the future.

Canada, which has the world’s largest population of polar bears, has chosen to not list the polar bear as threatened or endangered, but as a species of “special concern.” I believe our Service has erred in its determination because it is simply too soon to determine the impacts of loss of sea ice on the present population.

I am concerned that a threatened listing could have serious ramifications for the State of Alaska and the development of all of our natural resources. I certainly don’t believe a threatened listing should affect the construction of an Alaskan natural gas pipeline, or of any other oil and gas projects, since there is zero evidence that any such project has harmed bear populations in the least. Clearly we want to promote the use of clean-burning natural gas to reduce carbon emissions.

So, I also agree with the agency that subsistence hunting and oil and gas development in Alaska are not a threat to the polar bear and welcome their qualified listing decision. Clearly the Marine Mammal Protection Act offers more protection for polar bears than the ESA does and current regulations should remain in place for these activities. But the qualified listing still doesn’t alleviate my deep concern that outside interests will now try to use the courts to expand the impact of this decision in ways never intended when the ESA became law.

I am afraid that this decision opens a Pandora’s Box that the Administration will now be unable to close.”

From Rep. Don Young:

“This polar bear decision represents an assault on sound science and common sense.” – U.S. Rep. Don Young

Washington, D.C. – The following is U.S. Rep. Don Young’s (R-Alaska) statement regarding the announcement today to list the polar bear as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Young is the Ranking Member on House Natural Resources Committee.

“This decision represents an assault on sound science and common sense. It is hard to fully blame the Secretary for this decision, which seriously threatens the economy and freedoms of Alaskans and all Americans. He has been compelled to make a premature decision by a Clinton-appointed federal judge in Oakland, California, who is presiding over a lawsuit

brought by radical environmental groups.

“However, with this decision, Secretary Kempthorne has determined that opportunities to continue to explore and drill in Alaska will not be impacted, and neither will resource and economic development opportunities for Alaskans and Alaska Natives. He is seeking to administer the listing in the most practical and sound manner as possible.

“Unfortunately, my fear is that radical environmental groups led by the Center for Biological Diversity, will file numerous frivolous lawsuits to stop development and traditional activities the Alaska Natives have conducted for thousands of years.

“Since the ESA was enacted 35 years ago, these radical environmental groups have misused both the ESA and courts to effectively regulate local economies and to destroy private property rights. While the ESA is a well-intentioned law, it has been stretched beyond its original meaning, and the consequence is that species are not being saved by it, some species that are not endangered are being listed as endangered, and the average American pays the price.

“This is a classic example of how these extreme environmental groups have meddled in the science of listing species under the ESA.

Polar Bear Population Has Increased By 15,000 to 20,000 Since 1950

“The polar bear populations are healthy. In 1950, there were an estimated 5,000 polar bears. Current estimates put the population at 20,000 to 25,000 polar bears.

“The science on Arctic ice, CO2 emissions and climate change is too speculative and uncertain to justify a listing of the polar bear as ‘threatened’. The listing decision is based on a computer projection of the healthy polar bear populations declining 45 to 50 years from now. This projection in turn relies on climate and ice modeling that, as the climate modelers concede, do not have predictive value.

“To list a species based on computer projection of what may happen 45 to 50 years from now is outrageous.

“In the past 13 years, I have authored bills to protect populations of rhinos, tigers, elephants, and other species that were truly ‘threatened’ or ‘endangered’. I care about the future of the polar bears. But I must oppose the listing of the healthy polar bear species based on an arbitrary computer projection of their population in 2050. This is not sound science, it’s a computer game.

“This listing is far beyond anything I imagined when I voted for the creation of the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

Center For Biological Diversity Plans To Use Polar Bears To Shut Down Domestic Energy Production

“We have clearly seen that one of the major problems is with the Act itself - it gives bureaucrats enormous authority to render arbitrary decisions that are not based on sound, accepted scientific and forecasting principles.

“It’s important to also examine the motives of the group that petitioned for the listing - the Center for Biological Diversity. The Center has not hidden its agenda, which is to impose price controls and energy rationing on hard working Americans. The authors of the polar bear petition outlined these goals very clearly in their published articles on the issue. They include finding a federal judge to:

- Increase mileage standards for autos and trucks beyond that which Congress decides;
- End all offshore oil and gas leasing in the entire United States Outer Continental Shelf;
- Shut down new coal-fired power plants;
- Kill oil shale leasing;
- Stop limestone mines for cement manufacturing;
- And endeavor to stop ‘dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other projects [...] individually and cumulatively having an appreciable effect on the atmosphere.’

(Cummings and Siegel, “Ursus Maritimus: Polar Bears on Thin Ice”, Natural Resources & Environment, Fall 2007).

“Does this sound far-fetched? Not where the San Francisco-based Ninth Circuit is concerned. The Center has indicated its ‘test’ for imposing energy rationing will be performed in the liberal Ninth Circuit, which has an overwhelming majority of its decisions overturned when heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.”

From Gov. Sarah Palin:

Polar Bear Listed as Threatened;

Governor Pledges to Work for Conservation

May 14, 2008, Anchorage, Alaska – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced its decision today to list the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. U.S. Department of Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne called Governor Sarah Palin this morning to inform her of the USFWS decision, and assured her that oil and gas developments are not to blame.

The state will work with the USFWS on the designation of critical habitat and development of any conservation actions that may be necessary to ensure the continued viability of the species.

While the state is disappointed with this decision, Governor Palin said, the state stands ready to assist the USFWS to ensure that polar bear populations remain viable for decades to come. “We offer the substantial expertise of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to assist in the protection of polar bears, and in minimizing negative impacts on the people of Alaska and on important activities elsewhere in the country,” she said.

“Alaskans take our public trust responsibilities for our resources very seriously, and we welcome the opportunity to work with the federal agencies to address the conservation needs of these magnificent animals,” Governor Palin said. “We will continue to take the steps necessary to ensure that polar bears continue to thrive for generations to come.”

The Governor expressed her hope that federal agencies will continue to provide for customary and traditional uses of polar bears. She also remains concerned that federal actions do not threaten the viable, productive and environmentally responsible oil and gas industry along Alaska’s North Slope. Attorney General Talis Colberg will review the USFWS decision and the accompanying administrative record to determine whether there are significant defects that merit judicial scrutiny.

Governor Palin’s comments on the listing can be found at the following link:

<http://www.gov.state.ak.us/audio/GovPalinPolarBearsEdit.mp3>

From the Center for Biological Diversity:

Environmental Groups Win Protection for Polar Bear

Faced With Scientific Evidence on Global Warming, Court Order, and Public Pressure, Government Grants Polar Bear Endangered Species Act Listing Due to Global Warming

WASHINGTON, D.C.— Following a three-year legal battle to protect the polar bear from extinction due to global warming, three environmental groups won protection for the species with the announcement today that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is listing the polar bear as a federally “threatened” species.

The decision was issued in response to a 2005 scientific petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace, and the Natural Resources Defense Council, and was required by a court order in a lawsuit brought by the groups to end the administration's delay in issuing a final Endangered Species Act listing decision.

While the polar bear listing is one of the administration's clearest acknowledgments to date of the urgent threat posed by global warming, the administration is simultaneously attempting to reduce the protections the bear will receive under the Act. It claims in the listing decision that federal agencies need not consider the impact of global warming pollution on the polar bear; it has also proposed a separate regulation reducing the protections the polar bear would otherwise receive.

“This decision is a watershed event because it has forced the Bush administration to acknowledge global warming's brutal impacts,” said Kassie Siegel, climate program director at the Center for Biological Diversity and lead author of the 2005 petition. “It’s not too late to save the polar bear, and we’ll keep fighting to ensure that the polar bear gets the help it needs through the full protections of the Endangered Species Act. The administration's attempts to reduce protection to the polar bear from greenhouse gas emissions are illegal and won't hold up in court.”

Polar bears live only in the Arctic and are totally dependent on the sea ice for all their essential needs. Global warming is an overwhelming threat to the polar bear, which is already suffering starvation, drowning, and population declines as the sea ice melts away.

"The polar bear is already on thin ice. Protecting the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act is a major step forward, but the Bush administration has proposed using loopholes in the law to allow the greatest threat to the polar bear — global warming pollution — to continue unabated," said Andrew Wetzler, director of the Endangered Species Project at NRDC. "If the key threats to the polar bear are not addressed soon, zoos will be the only place our grandchildren will be able to see a polar bear."

"The administration's inclusion of this language exempts the impact of global warming on the polar bear and would gut any protections the ruling would have provided," said Melanie Duchin, global warming campaigner for Greenpeace USA in Alaska. "Global warming threatens polar bears with extinction, so to exempt global warming pollution from the formula for protecting the species violates the spirit and intent of the ESA."

Each step in the listing process has required legal action to enforce the Endangered Species Act's deadlines for protecting species. The three groups first sued the Bush administration in December 2005 because the government had ignored their petition to protect the polar bear. As a result of that lawsuit, in February 2006 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that protection of polar bears "may be warranted," and commenced a full status review of the species. A settlement agreement in the case committed the Service to make the second of three required findings by December 27, 2006, at which time the administration announced the proposal to list the species as "threatened." By law, the administration was required to make today's final listing decision within one year of the proposal, or by January 9, 2008. When the administration failed to comply with that deadline, the groups filed suit on March 10, 2008 to end the delay. On April 28, the District Court issued an order requiring the administration to issue a decision by May 15.

Scientists predicted and have now documented the grim impacts to polar bears as the Arctic warms rapidly. Shrinking sea ice drastically restricts polar bears' ability to hunt their main prey, ice seals. In the spring of 2006, scientists located the bodies of several bears that had starved to death. Reduced food availability due to global warming has also caused polar bears to resort to cannibalism off the north coast of Alaska and Canada. In September, the U.S. Geological Survey predicted that, based on polar bear distribution and current global warming projections, two-thirds of the world's polar bear population would likely be extinct by 2050, including all polar bears within the United States.

The Arctic melt is also outpacing predictions. September 2007 shattered all previous records for sea-ice loss when the Arctic ice cap shrank to a record 1 million square miles — equivalent to an area six times the size of California — below the average summer sea-ice extent of the past several decades, reaching levels not predicted to occur until mid-century. Scientists already predict that this year's sea-ice minimum could shatter the record set in 2007, and several leading scientists have now stated that the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free in the summer by 2012.

Listing the polar bear guarantees that federal agencies will be obligated to ensure that any action they authorize, fund, or carry out will not jeopardize polar bears' continued existence or adversely modify their critical habitat, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be required to prepare a recovery plan for the polar bear, specifying measures necessary for its protection.

From Defenders of Wildlife:

Polar Bear Listed as Threatened But Protection Uncertain

Defenders of Wildlife welcomes decision to list polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, points out Bush administration still unwilling to address global warming

WASHINGTON, May 14 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Defenders of Wildlife today welcomed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) decision to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This move officially recognizes that polar bears are threatened with extinction from global warming, which is melting the Arctic sea ice where polar bears hunt for ringed and bearded seals, their primary food source. Defenders cautioned, however, that the Bush administration continues to be unwilling to address global warming, which is the leading threat to the polar bear.

With the USGS predicting the demise of Alaskas bears within 50 years, this decision to list the polar bear is long overdue, said Defenders of Wildlife President Rodger Schlickeisen. Unfortunately, the Bush administration is unwilling to act to address the fundamental causes of global warming.

In September, the U.S. Geological Survey published a series of reports predicting that loss of summer sea ice crucial habitat for polar bears could lead to the demise of two-thirds of the worlds polar bears by mid-century, including all of Alaskas polar bears. As sea ice disappears, polar bears are forced to spend more time on land in search of food, placing stress on the bears and increasing the likelihood of often fatal conflicts (for the bears) with humans.

Listing polar bears as threatened under the ESA should help protect polar bear habitat from threats such as oil and gas development, which the Bush administration has proposed in pristine areas including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the primary land denning habitat for the polar bear. Instead, the administration has made it clear that the ESA will not provide any additional protections from these activities than those that already exist under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Today's announcement confirms yet again that global warming is already affecting the United States and its natural heritage, said Schlickeisen. After years of denial, the Bush administration can no longer avoid facing up to the reality that global warming is happening, with long-term and devastating consequences for wildlife and people. However, the Bush administration remains committed to pushing through oil and gas lease sales in prime polar bear habitat. Defenders of Wildlife will do everything in its power to stop this senseless development.

Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With more than 1 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come.