

# Bush's polar bear ultimatum

Robert Lusetich, Los Angeles correspondent | *May 01, 2008*

**THE Bush administration must decide within a fortnight whether the polar bear deserves to be considered an endangered species because global warming is melting its icy domains.**

A federal judge in California imposed the deadline yesterday after the US Interior Department missed its own January 9 deadline on making a decision, despite an internal departmental preliminary finding in 2006 that the bear's habitat is being destroyed by higher temperatures.

Three environmental groups, including Greenpeace, took the US Government to court over the stalling and rejoiced over yesterday's ruling by US District Court judge Claudia Wilkens.

"Today's decision is a huge victory for the polar bear," said Kassie Siegel, director of the climate program at the Centre for Biological Diversity.

"By May 15, the polar bear should receive the protections it deserves under the Endangered Species Act, which is the first step toward saving the polar bear and the entire Arctic ecosystem from global warming."

The Bush administration claims environmental groups are using legislation such as the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Air Act to forward their climate change agenda and force the US into restricting its greenhouse gas emissions.

Critics of global warming say the polar bear measure would be used to take governments to court when they build new power plants.

Democrats on Capitol Hill say the Bush administration is stone-walling because it plans to sell a multi-billion-dollar oil and gas lease on the Chukchi Sea, off the Alaskan coast, a region rich with polar bears.

Although a spokesman for the Interior Department yesterday said the decision was being reviewed and "we will evaluate the legal options", Ms Siegel said the US could only make one decision.

"The science is perfectly clear; the polar bear is an endangered species," she said.

Summer sea-ice - which the bears need to hunt seals - shrank last year to a record low, about 4.3 million square kilometers in September, nearly 40per cent less ice than the long-term average between 1979 and 2000.

Scientists report polar bears resorting to cannibalism and that their reproduction rates have fallen.

The US Geological Survey has predicted that the world's population of polar bears may be cut by two-thirds by 2050 and that only a handful of the creatures will be left by the end of the century.

Last week, Canada - home to two-thirds of the world's polar bears - said it had a "special concern" for bears, but that animals in Canada were not threatened with extinction.