

U.S. group calls on Canada to list polar bears as threatened

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An American environmental activist group says it wants Canada to follow suit if the U.S. lists polar bears as a threatened species.

With the U.S. government expected to announce within weeks whether to grant the bears protection as a threatened species under its Endangered Species Act, the Center for Biological Diversity criticized a Canadian scientific committee's recommendation last week to list the bears as a species of "special concern" in Canada.

"The only way that recommendation was issued for a 'species of special concern' was by simply ignoring projections based on global warming, and we think that was incorrect," Kassie Siegel, an attorney with the California and Arizona-based group, told CBC News on Tuesday.

On Friday, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) recommended that the federal government keep polar bears on the list of species of "special concern," a status that is one step down from "threatened" and two steps down from "endangered."

The polar bear has had the "special concern" status since 1991.

Members on the scientific advisory committee said the "special concern" listing best reflects varying conditions among the numerous polar bear populations in Canada's North, which has declining polar bear numbers in some parts but stable or even rising numbers in others.

But Siegel called COSEWIC's decision weak, saying polar bears in Canada should instead be listed as a threatened or endangered species, not a species of special concern.

"That recommendation explicitly stated that the projections they used to classify the polar bear excluded the threat of global warming," she said.

Siegel added that the U.S. Geological Service concluded last year that two-thirds of polar bears could be gone by the middle of this century if greenhouse gas emission trends continue.

But the organization representing Inuit in Nunavut said COSEWIC should not have proposed any listing for the polar bear, special concern or otherwise.

Speaking to CBC News in Inuktitut, Gabriel Nirlungayuk, director of wildlife with Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., said polar bear numbers are actually on the rise.

The committee's recommendations will go to federal Environment Minister John Baird in August. It will then be up to cabinet to decide how the polar bear is listed.

Meanwhile, a U.S. federal judge ordered that country's Interior Department to announce its decision on the polar bear's status by May 15.

The judge's ruling, issued late Monday, sided with conservation groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, which accused the Bush administration of delaying the decision.

Siegel and other environmental activists have long called for the polar bears to be listed as a threatened species because of climate change shrinking the Arctic sea ice on which the bears live.

A spokesman with the U.S Interior Department told CBC News that his department will look at its options before deciding

whether to appeal the federal judge's ruling.

"We will evaluate the legal options and we will decide the appropriate course of action," spokesman Shane Wolfe said.