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Ursus Maritimus Community Roar (Quietly) Over Court Ruling

Posted by Dan Slater

The polar bear got some good news on Monday night when a federal judge gave the Interior Department until May 15 to determine whether or not the animal deserves protection under the [Endangered Species Act](#). (Click for reports from the [Environment News Service](#), the [AP](#) and the [NYT](#).) According to reports, global warming largely accounts for the dwindling population of the polar bear, or *ursus maritimus*, one of the world's largest land predators.

U.S. District Judge Claudia Wilken sided with conservation groups and environmentalists in concluding that the department missed a Jan. 9 deadline for a decision. Oil companies have reportedly opposed listing the bear as endangered, arguing that such a move isn't warranted based on current population numbers and the fact that listing the animal as endangered will trigger costly new restrictions on their Alaska operations.

The number of polar bears, according to the AP report, is estimated at 20,000 to 25,000 globally. In keeping with timetables set by the Endangered Species Act, the Interior Department was supposed to reach a decision on the matter in January, after announcing back in December 2006 that the bear's Arctic habitat "may literally be melting." Days before the deadline, however, the agency's Fish and Wildlife Service said it needed more time.

"Defendants have been in violation of the law requiring them to publish the listing determination for nearly 120 days," Judge Wilken wrote. "Other than the general complexity of finalizing the rule, Defendants offer no specific facts that would justify the delay, much less further delay."

Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity, called the judge's order a victory, despite not knowing whether polar bears ultimately will be listed. "It means that whatever political interference going on right now is going to be short-circuited," she said. "The politicians and the bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., are going to have to stop interfering with the decision and get it out the door." The law requires a decision based on science, she said, and science shows the Arctic is thawing. "The science is perfectly clear. There's no dispute. The polar bear is an endangered species," she said.