

## It's Official: Polar Bears Threatened

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The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) announced today that the polar bear will be listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) because its sea ice habitat is melting. But the agency does not intend to tackle the underlying problem, that is, the rise in carbon emissions that contribute to global warming. The agency also created a special exemption to allow oil and gas exploration to continue in polar bear habitat in Alaska.

DOI's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) proposed listing the polar bear as threatened in January 2007, after a petition and lawsuit by environmental groups ([Science](#), 5 January 2007, p. 25). Meanwhile, DOI sold leases for oil and gas exploration in polar habitat ([Science](#), 25 January, p. 399). After DOI missed its deadline, a federal court ordered the agency to make a decision by 15 May.

In announcing the decision one day before that deadline, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said he relied on 10 climate models. These models, analyzed by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), suggest that the melting of sea ice will continue to threaten polar bears and that the population might decline by two-thirds by 2050. Seven of the models predicted a 97% loss of sea ice by 2100. In 2007, the polar sea set a record: some 39% less ice than the average between 1979 and 2000.

The listing will make it illegal to import polar bear trophies from sport hunting. But it hasn't prompted the Bush Administration to change its stance and propose regulating power plants or other sources of CO<sub>2</sub> that are contributing to the loss of sea ice. "I am taking administrative and regulatory action to make certain the ESA isn't abused to make global warming policies," Kempthorne said at a press conference. In addition, he proposed an exemption allowing continued development of oil and gas exploration and extraction, which USGS considers less of a threat than loss of sea ice. The department will accept public comment for 60 days on the exemption to the act.

The environmental groups that sued FWS praised the listing but criticized the decision not to try to limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. "The Administration's attempts to reduce protection to the polar bear from greenhouse gas emissions are illegal and won't hold up in court," says Kassie Siegel, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, an advocacy group, in a press release.

FWS director H. Dale Hall said at the press conference that the polar bear is already protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and that any activity permitted under that act will still be allowed. But Siegel says that MMPA is actually weaker because it doesn't designate critical habitat nor require agency review of actions by other federal agencies.