

Tucson group lauds decision to protect polar bears

[B. POOLE and The Associated Press](#)

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The fight to protect polar bears does not end with the federal government putting North America's largest carnivore on the endangered species list, said the lead author of the petition that forced the listing.

Now comes the fight to get the government to designate habitat for the bears, said Kassie Siegel, climate program director for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, which with Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council petitioned in 2005 to have the bears listed.

"It's now time to start enforcing this . . . They are legally obligated to designate habitat and they have not done that," Siegel said after Wednesday's decision.

The Endangered Species Act requires that habitat be mapped concurrently with listing.

The Interior Department declared the polar bear a threatened species because of the loss of Arctic sea ice but cautioned the decision should not be linked to global warming.

Siegel now expects all federal agencies to examine policies to ensure that they do not contribute to global warming, which she insists is the cause of polar bear habitat decline.

"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," Siegel said in a news release.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne cited declines in sea ice over the last three decades and projections of continued losses, meaning, he said, that the polar bear is a species likely to be in danger of extinction in the near future.

But Kempthorne said it would be "wholly inappropriate" to use the protection of the bear to reduce greenhouse gases, or to broadly address climate change.

The Endangered Species Act "is not the right tool to set U.S. climate policy," said Kempthorne, reflecting a view recently expressed by President Bush.

The department outlined a set of administrative actions and limits to how it planned to protect the bear with its new status so that it would not have wide-ranging adverse impact on economic activities from building power plants to oil and gas exploration.

"This listing will not stop global climate change or prevent any sea ice from melting," said Kempthorne. He said he had consulted with the White House on the decision, but "at no time was there ever a suggestion that this was not my decision." He cited conclusions by department scientists that sea ice loss will likely result in two-thirds of the polar bears disappearing by mid-century. The bear population across the Arctic from Alaska to Greenland doubled from about 12,000 to 25,000 since 1960, but he noted that scientists now predict a significant population decline. Studies last year by the U.S. Geological Survey suggested 15,000 bears would be lost in coming decades with those in the western Hudson Bay area of Alaska and Canada under the greatest stress.

A species is declared "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act if it is found to be at risk of becoming endangered in the foreseeable future.

Wednesday's listing is not the end of a process, Siegel said.

"This is just the beginning. This is the critical first step toward protecting the polar bear," she said.