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Polar Bear Review Draws 140,000 Comments

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials in Alaska face some 140,000 submitted comments on whether to list polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, but said they have no feel yet for how public sentiment is divided. The last day for the public to comment on the petition was Friday.

Rosa Meehan, chief of the agency's marine mammal management program, said the comment period was intended to seek biological, environmental or technical information, but the agency would not discount comments that simply advocate or oppose more protection for polar bears.

"Someone took the initiative to do that," she said. "It's good to have a sense of the level of public interest."

The Center for Biological Diversity, an advocacy group, petitioned in February 2005 to list polar bears. Classified as a marine mammal because they spend much of their lives on sea ice, polar bears are threatened because of drastic declines in ocean ice due to global warming, according to the petition.

When the Fish and Wildlife Service did not meet deadlines in the law for action, the center and two other conservation groups sued. A settlement calls for the agency to make a decision by December 2006.

The agency sought comments on polar bear population, distribution, habitat, plus threats from development, contaminants and poaching. The 140,000 or so comments submitted as of Friday afternoon had not been tallied by content, Meehan said.

Environmentalists hope a listing tied to global warming will force a recovery plan that includes provisions to limit greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

"The debate on global warming is over," said Andrew Wetzler of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It is now evident in the Arctic, and across the globe, that warming due to rising greenhouse gas emissions is under way. The ... polar bear, if not protected, may become one of its first victims."

Some opponents, however, while conceding global warming was a fact, said forecasts of its effects and how quickly they may occur were far too tenuous to support listing.

"Climate change will affect all species to some extent, including humans," said Mitchell K. Taylor, manager of wildlife for the government of Nunavut in Canada, in one comment among samples released by the agency. "If the likelihood of change is regarded as sufficient cause to designate a species or population as 'threatened,' then all species around the world are 'threatened.'"