



Polar bears may get endangered status

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) -- Amid concerns that global warming is melting away the icy habitats where polar bears live, the federal government is reviewing whether they should be considered a threatened species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Tuesday that protection may be warranted under the Endangered Species Act, and began a review process to consider if the bears should be listed.

The agency will seek information about population distribution, habitat, effects of climate change on the bears and their prey, potential threats from development, contaminants and poaching during the next 60 days.

The decision comes after the Center for Biological Diversity of Joshua Tree, California, filed a petition last year that said polar bears could become extinct by the end of the century because their sea ice habitat is melting away.

The group, joined by the environmental groups Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace, also filed a federal lawsuit in December to seek federal protections for the polar bear.



Polar bears under U.S. jurisdiction are found only in Alaska.

"I think it's a very important acknowledgment that global warming is transforming the Arctic and threatening polar bears with extinction," said Kassie Siegel, lead author of the center's petition.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Bruce Woods said the petition "contains sufficient information to convince us that we need to do a more thorough analysis of the polar bear population worldwide."

Polar bears under U.S. jurisdiction are found only in Alaska. They spend most of their lives on sea ice, but the center said if current rates of decline in sea ice continue, the summertime Arctic could be completely ice-free well before the end of the century.

There is some disagreement about whether polar bears are actually being threatened.

Federal wildlife officials report healthy populations of polar bears, and are working on a hard population count. However, the University of Colorado's National Snow and Ice Data Center, NASA and the University of Washington said last fall that there was a "stunning reduction in Arctic sea ice at the end of the northern summer."

If the polar bear were listed as a threatened species, federal regulatory agencies would be required to consider how their decisions affect polar bears.

A listing could affect industries seeking permission to release greenhouse gases or decisions such as setting fuel economy standards for vehicles, Siegel said.

