



Polar Bear Fate Undecided

U.S. Agency Says It Will Miss Deadline for Endangered Species Decision

By **CLAYTON SANDELL**

The head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took responsibility Monday for missing a deadline requiring a final decision on whether to give polar bears federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Director H. Dale Hall told reporters in an afternoon conference call that a September 2007 report from the U.S. Geological Survey — followed by a required public comment period — made the Wednesday deadline impossible to meet.

“Time just became an issue on workload on our folks to be able to do the job they should do,” Hall said. “This decision is so important to a lot of people, including us, that we want to make sure it’s the right decision.”

Hall said the final answer would come in the next month.

Environmental groups Greenpeace, Center for Biological Diversity and the National Resources Defense Council issued a joint statement announcing their intention to sue the federal government for the delay.

“Stalling has cost us dearly, putting the polar bear at risk of extinction and jeopardizing the future welfare



(ABC News)

of billions of people around the world. This further unjustified delay is emblematic of the administration’s approach,” Kert Davies at Greenpeace said in the statement.

A “threatened” listing under the Endangered Species Act would require measures — such as limits on development — to protect the polar bear habitat. The bears depend on sea ice to hunt ring seals, one of their primary foods. Human-induced climate change is causing the sea ice to melt at rapidly increasing rates. The U.S. Geological Survey’s September report, for example, found that melting Arctic sea ice could wipe

out polar bears in Alaska and kill off two-thirds of the species’ global population.

Last week, the U.S. Minerals Management Service announced a plan to open almost 30 million acres of polar bear habitat off the coast of Alaska to gas and oil exploration.

“Rather than speed up protections for this iconic animal, the Bush administration is speeding up its giveaway of polar bear habitat to big oil,” said Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., in a statement. Markey chairs the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming.