

Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

Congress to research delays in polar bear decision

Senators call for Interior Secretary to speak before committee

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WASHINGTON — The top Democrat on the U.S. Senate environment committee wants Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to explain why the department has delayed a ruling on the expansion of federal protection of the polar bear.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., sent a letter to Kempthorne on Thursday requesting him to appear before the committee when the Senate reconvenes after the Easter recess.

“It is time for the Interior secretary to answer questions about the administration’s continued foot-dragging on the polar bear listing,” Boxer said in a prepared statement.

In the letter, Boxer says she will hold an oversight hearing either April 2 or April 8. She gave Kempthorne until today to confirm his appearance.

Boxer also questioned why the department went ahead with an oil and gas lease sale in the Chukchi Sea — home to about 20 percent of the world’s polar bears — before finalizing a decision on the listing.

Interior spokesman Shane Wolfe acknowledged the department had received the letter but refused to speculate whether Kempthorne would appear before the committee. Kempthorne is on vacation over the Easter break.

It has been a year since Kempthorne proposed listing polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, citing the loss of Arctic sea ice caused by global warming.

Federal law requires a decision on proposed listings to be made within one year, but the department postponed a decision on the matter, citing the need for more time to review more than 670,000 public comments.

Kempthorne’s decision to consider listing the polar bear resolved a lawsuit filed by Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Listing the polar bear would mark the first time that specific protection would be granted as a result of the impact of global warming. It would also be the first listing based on computer modeling of expected future events instead of on scientific observations.

The Interior Department’s inspector general has launched a preliminary investigation into why the department has put off a decision on whether to list the polar bear. The investigation comes at the request of several environmental groups.

Earlier this month, the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council filed another lawsuit asking a U.S. District Court in California to compel the Bush administration to immediately issue a final decision on polar bear protection.

“This administration seems to have no qualms with violating the law, but when they’re facing a court order for contempt, that usually gets them to make a decision,” said Brendan Cummings, a representative of the Center for Biological Diversity.

A recent U.S. Geological Survey report found that unless greenhouse gas emissions are curbed significantly, two-thirds of the world’s polar bears — including all Alaska bears — will disappear by 2050.

Opponents to putting the bears on the Endangered Species List argue that listing the polar bear could allow legal challenges to Arctic oil and gas development. They also point out that the bears are already covered by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

U.S. Rep. Don Young said he believed the bear would be listed but that development in the Arctic would not be affected because the Interior Department would consider the impact of greenhouse gas emissions at the point they are emitted, not upstream at the point of production.

State officials in Washington said they have been told a final decision could be issued within a couple of days or weeks.

Interior spokesman Wolfe declined to speculate on when a decision might be forthcoming.

Federal grants

The Alaska congressional delegation announced the following federal grants beneficial to Fairbanks.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks was awarded \$198,000 from the U.S. Department of Commerce for the Fisheries Extension Enhancement program.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a \$248,000 community development block grant to Fairbanks.

The Alaska Housing Finance Corporation received \$1.7 million to assist in the weatherization of low-income housing.

And finally ...

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee came out on top again in February against the National Republican Senatorial Committee in the battle to raise funds, according to Congress Daily.

The DSCC raised \$4.8 million compared to the NRSC, which brought in nearly \$4 million for the month. Both committees raised more money in February than they did in the previous month.

The committees use the money to get their perspective members elected to the U.S. Senate. The DSCC spent \$2.5 million in the 29-day period, compared to the NRSC's \$1.9 million.

The NRSC had \$15.3 million in the bank at the beginning of March. The DSCC was sitting on \$32.8 million.

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