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Conservation groups await federal decision on polar bear listing

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- As the deadline approaches for a federal government decision on adding polar bears to the list of threatened species, the author of the petition seeking protective status says the need is greater than ever because of global warming.

And Kassie Siegel, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity in Joshua Tree, Calif., said nothing short of curbing greenhouse gas emissions is likely to save them.

"We do not save polar bears without rapidly slashing greenhouse gas emissions," Siegel said. "We need rapid and decisive action."

A decision on declaring polar bears "threatened," which could trigger limits on development that adversely affects the animals, is due Wednesday, one year after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a proposed finding in the Federal Register. Petition supporters say a decision could be delayed because of the extraordinary events in the Arctic last year and the amount of new information federal managers have had to digest.

The petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace

and the Natural Resources Defense Council more than two years ago claims the polar bear's primary habitat, sea ice, is threatened because of global warming. A record low for summer sea ice in the Arctic was set in 2005. That mark was shattered by 23 percent in 2007, when ice diminished to 1.65 million square miles, nearly 40 percent less ice than the long-term average between 1979 and 2000.

Polar bears spend most of their lives on sea ice. They use it to hunt their primary prey, ringed seals, the only ice seal that lives under the frozen ice cap. They hunt ribbon and bearded seals in broken ice.

Sea ice in 2007 receded far beyond the relatively shallow continental shelf, putting bears beyond the most productive waters favored by their prey. According to the government biologists, more open water could mean the animals will burn more energy reaching their preferred habitat, resulting in lost weight, poorer health and more deaths. And that's before the nightmare of an ice-free Arctic that Mark Serreze, senior research scientist at the National Snow and Ice Data Center, predicts could occur by 2030.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne on Dec. 27, 2006, proposed listing polar bears as "threatened" under the

Endangered Species Act. He cited thinning sea ice as a major problem for the animals.

"We are concerned the polar bear's habitat may literally be melting," he said.

"Endangered" means a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. The "threatened" listing proposed for polar bears is one step below, a category that means a species is likely to become endangered.

After the proposed listing, Kempthorne and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had a year to complete studies and decide whether to declare the polar bear threatened.

Melanie Duchin, a representative of Greenpeace in Alaska, said the need is urgent.

"If you look at the science and look at what's going on with polar bears -- losing weight, cannibalizing each other, drowning off the coast -- it's clear they're in jeopardy," she said.

Siegel said the listing proposal has accelerated research, including a U.S. Geological Survey report released in September that concluded that two-thirds of the world's polar bears, including the entire population in Alaska, will be killed off by 2050

because of thinning sea ice from global warming in the Arctic.

Declaring polar bears threatened would require the Fish and Wildlife Service to create a recovery plan. Agency officials have been reluctant to speculate what that might entail.

Near Alaska, it could give environmentalists ammunition to seek limits on offshore oil and gas exploration in places such as the Chukchi Sea off the state's northwest coast, where the U.S. Minerals Management Service on Wednesday completed details of a lease sale scheduled for February.

"It certainly doesn't help to be developing their habitat," Siegel said.

But that, she acknowledged, does not address the underlying cause of polar bear problems.

"At the top of that list would have to be addressing global warming," she said.

Her organization has called for limits on oceangoing vessels that burn bunker oil, the dirtiest petroleum product, improved fuel economy in vehicles, caps and measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,

the construction of carbon-neutral buildings and improved energy efficiency of existing ones.

"The technologies are there. It's all things that will improve our lives, improve our economy. We need to get started," Siegel said.