

FWS curbs scientists' discussions of polar bears, melting ice

By Allison Winter

Fish and Wildlife Service biologists or other employees traveling in the Arctic should not discuss climate change, sea ice or polar bears unless designated to do so, according to internal agency memorandums.

And the Alaska FWS regional director must report to headquarters on who will be the "spokesman" on any trip concerning climate change and must understand the "administration's position" on the issues, says the memos that were obtained and circulated by environmentalists last night.

The directive was issued as the agency weighs extending protections for the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act. FWS proposed listing the bear in December, because rising temperatures in the Arctic are shrinking the sea ice it uses as part of its habitat. Government scientists have predicted much of the sea ice could vanish within half a century.

Interior Deputy Secretary Lynn Scarlett told a House panel she learned about the memos in a story in today's *New York Times*. The policy did not come from the Interior secretary's office, she told a House Appropriations panel.

"There may be a simple explanation" for the memos, she said.

"When we have international delegations, it's common practice for all administrations to have a lead delegate" to ensure everyone is on the same page, Scarlett said. But she added she did not know if that is the case in this instance.

Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued for the bear's protection, said the memo highlights the agency's internal conflict on the bear.

"The Bush administration has put itself in the indefensible position of admitting that global warming is killing the polar bear at the same time it refuses to regulate greenhouse gas emissions," **Suckling said in a statement**. "Thus the massive public interest in the polar bear is a media nightmare for them."

Environmentalists say the listing should force the government to more strictly regulate industrial carbon emissions. But FWS officials are downplaying what protections a listing might entail. At a public hearing this week in Washington, agency officials said they would focus on "direct" effects on the bear, not carbon regulations.

Memo calls for 'official spokesman'

The FWS memo on travel requests says the regional director must report on "who'll be the official spokesman on the trip and the one responding to questions on these issues, particularly polar bears, including a statement of assurance that these individuals understand the administration's position on these issues."

A sample travel [request](#) from Alaska describes that one employee would speak only on human interaction with the bear, not climate change.

Another [letter](#) describes a meeting where one administration official, briefed on the administration's position on climate, would speak on the issue and a FWS employee would not.

Both travel requests state: "This traveler understands the administration's position on climate change, polar bears and sea ice, and will not be speaking on or responding to these issues."

Senior reporter Dan Berman contributed to this report.