

ENDANGERED SPECIES: House lawmakers enter fray over polar bear habitat (12/23/2009)

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Correction appended.

A group of House Republicans asked the Obama administration yesterday to consider oil and gas drilling in its habitat-protection plan for the polar bear.

Rep. Don Young of Alaska headed a group of 12 lawmakers who told Interior Secretary Ken Salazar that the "best available science" may show shipping and energy development could have minimal impacts on the bear. One Democrat, Rep. Dan Boren of Oklahoma, signed the letter.

The lawmakers asked Salazar to tread carefully with a habitat designation that could hurt Alaska's economy and the United States'. "We sincerely hope the economic well-being of hardworking Americans will not be an afterthought in the [Fish and Wildlife Service's] decision-making process," they wrote.

In October, the Obama administration proposed protecting more than 200,000 square miles in Alaska as critical habitat for the polar bear, an area the administration said would be the largest so designated to protect an imperiled species.

The public comment period on the designation is open until next Monday. Fish and Wildlife has a court-ordered deadline to make a final determination by next June 30. An economic analysis of the proposal is expected early next year.

Interior's sweeping proposal includes barrier islands, inland "denning" areas and sea ice. Most habitat protections would be provided to offshore sea ice.

The critical habitat designation would add another layer of protection for the bear, which Interior listed as a threatened species last year because of melting sea ice. But environmental and industry groups have questioned what that designation could mean for oil and gas drilling in the Arctic.

Because of protections in place under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act for the polar bear, oil and gas companies already must consult with wildlife officials on how their Arctic activities could affect bears. Interior has said new habitat protections would not add to the consultation process already in place.

But environmental groups, which have challenged the administration at every turn with lawsuits pressing for more stringent protections for the bear, contend the new habitat protections beef up their case against oil and gas drilling, which they think could harm polar bears.

The House lawmakers urged Interior to "ensure the polar bear and other wildlife thrive," but also to make sure offshore areas of the Alaskan coasts remain open to "responsible" oil and gas development. Analyses from the Fish and Wildlife Service have found that oil and gas development has had minimal effects on the polar bear population.

But environmentalists want more stringent protections against oil and gas development because of the potential for a spill to devastate bears if something goes wrong.

"One of the worst things we can do to polar bears is open up their most important habitats to oil development, particularly given there is no known way to clean up an oil spill in icy waters," said Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity. "A critical habitat rule, properly implemented and enforced, would likely prevent the unwise and unsustainable offshore oil development in the Arctic that Don Young is so entranced with."

The Houston-based industry group Consumer Energy Alliance said the proposed rule as it is written would lock up "enormous" opportunities for energy development. The group insists that oil and gas drilling and polar bears can thrive together.

"Balancing the safe, responsible development of America's abundant natural resources while ensuring its critical habitat is preserved is something we can do, must do, and in fact have done for many years," David Holt, president of the Consumer Energy Alliance, said yesterday.

Correction: An earlier version identified Young as ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee. He is no longer the committee's ranking member.