

'Threatened' polar bear listing debated

GLOBAL WARMING: Sea ice is gone; critics call that insufficient.

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A marked decline in sea ice off Alaska's coast is not enough for the government to take the drastic step of listing polar bears -- a species dependent on ice -- as threatened, critics said Thursday at the first of three public hearings on the proposal.

Restrictions that could kick in with a listing under the Endangered Species Act because of global warming would be too burdensome given the unknowns about the future of polar bears, such as the extent of the loss of Arctic sea ice in the next 100 years and whether the animals would face extinction, according to opponents.

"The listing likely will force anyone in America whose business requires the emission of greenhouse gases to go through an additional layer of consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service, creating delays and expenses," according to an advance copy of remarks from Marilyn Crockett, deputy director of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association, a trade group.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is taking testimony through April 9 on the proposal to list polar bears as threatened, or likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. The more drastic listing under the law is "endangered," in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne in December proposed listing polar bears as threatened. His decision to begin the process was forced by a petition filed by [the Center for Biological Diversity](#) of Joshua Tree, Calif. It said polar bears could become extinct by the end of the century because their sea ice habitat is melting away from global warming.

In a U.S. Geological Survey report released in November, federal researchers said the Beaufort Sea polar bear population, one of two off the coast of Alaska, has shown significant changes in cub survival.

The report compared data on cubs collected in 1967-89 with data from 1990 to last spring. For polar bears measured during autumn months, the number of surviving cubs born that spring declined from a mean of 61 cubs per 100 females to a mean of 25 cubs per 100 females.

The study also determined that adult males weighed less and had smaller skulls than those captured and measured two decades ago.

Researchers estimated the Beaufort Sea polar bear population at 1,526, down from a previous estimate of 1,800 bears, but did not conclude that the population had dropped because the latest study used different counting methods and the two estimates could not be statistically differentiated.

The Arctic has already lost an area of sea ice twice the size of Texas, said Mary Walker with Alaska Conservation Solutions.

"As a result, polar bears are starving to death, drowning, and now fewer cubs are surviving," Walker said, according to her prepared remarks.

But Crockett said the listing would hurt investment in Alaska even though it's not clear how additional restrictions would help polar bears.

She said there is scientific consensus regarding the occurrence of global climate change but no consensus on the reliability of the models used to project future climate.

"The range of uncertainty regarding the timing, extent and location of future climate impacts is enormous," Crockett said.

If the agency decides a listing is warranted, it would be the first for a species that is healthy in numbers and distribution, she said.

"It seems odd to us that the Fish and Wildlife Service would list the bear without clearly identifying how the listing will improve the conservation of the bear," she said.

Carl Portman, deputy director of the Resource Development Council, said in testimony prepared for the hearing that polar bears are abundant, their population is healthy and they're well-managed and protected by international and domestic agreements.

A listing decision should be made on what's known, not on the speculative nature of the climate models and carbon-emission scenarios, he said.

Two more public hearings are scheduled, including one Monday in Washington, D.C., and one Wednesday in Barrow. A decision on listing polar bears is due next January.

