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# Global warming putting polar bears at risk, Inslee says

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Calling the polar bear a victim of global warming, a Democratic congressman Monday called on the U.S. government to protect “the beloved American icon” from the effects of the melting Arctic.

“We cannot talk about this species without talking about global warming and its effect on the Arctic,” Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Bainbridge Island, said in remarks prepared for a public hearing Monday night.

“Today, polar bears, a beloved American icon, are at risk,” said Inslee, a member of the House Natural Resources Committee and a leading advocate of aggressive action on global warming.

A marine mammal, the polar bear is dependent on sea ice for survival. Yet as a result of climate change, “these magnificent creatures — which can swim at least 50 miles — have drowned and starved to death,” Inslee said.

Inslee made the comments at the second of three public hearings scheduled on a proposal by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne proposed the listing in late December after environmental groups filed a petition stating that polar bears could become

extinct by the end of the century because their sea-ice habitat is melting away from global warming.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is taking testimony through April 9 on the proposal, which would list polar bears as likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. The listing is less drastic than “endangered,” or in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

At a public hearing last week in Alaska, speakers said a marked decline in sea ice off the state’s coast is not enough to justify designating polar bears as threatened.

Restrictions that could kick in with a listing under the Endangered Species Act 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, opponents said.

Inslee called such thinking misguided.

“The best scientific evidence shows that the polar bear and its habitat are threatened,” he said.

To those concerned about the economic impact of regulating greenhouse gas emissions, “I ask you to remember our great country’s history as innovators, because our nation has the tools to tackle this great problem,” Inslee said. “Global warming is no longer a problem for the future.”

An endangered-species listing for polar bears would be an important step to aid the polar bears’ recovery and conserve its sea-ice habitat for generations to come, he said.

The state of Alaska has not decided whether to back the federal proposal. But a top aide to Republican Gov. Sarah Palin questioned whether polar bears really need sea ice to survive.

Tina Cunnings, a biologist and a special assistant to the commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game, said polar bears are adaptable to use land for hunting. While preferred food such as ice seals are declining, bears are adapting to alternative food sources, she said.