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Congressman Don Young (KTUU-TV)



Resource Development Council for Alaska spokesman Carl Portman (KTUU-TV)

\$2.6 billion in offshore oil and gas leases were sold for the Chuckchi Sea nearly a full month after the bear decision was due. (KTUU-TV)

by Jill Burke
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska - After an overdue deadline conservation groups are taking the Bush administration to court to get things moving, with

the long-term health of polar bears on the line.

Researchers say the loss of sea ice, and with it hunting and breeding grounds, could force polar bears into extinction.

With a deadline about whether to offer the polar bear federal protection now two months past due, conservationists are taking the U.S. Dept. of the Interior to court to get things moving.

"We filed this lawsuit today to end the Bush administration's illegal delay on issuing a final listing determination for the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act," Center for Biological Diversity director of Climate, Air, and Energy Program Kassie Siegel.

A decision about whether to classify polar bears as threatened was due Jan. 9.

Getting there has been a contentious road.

"Polar bears are not threatened," Congressman Don Young said last April. "Polar bears are being used by interest groups to stop any fossil fuel development in the state of Alaska."

It's a point of view that's polarized conservationists and with people who want to protect oil and gas development.

"As Alaskans we should be very concerned about this listing, because oil and gas provides 90 percent of the state revenue at current oil prices," said Resource Development Council for Alaska spokesman Carl Portman last September.

Siegel thinks it's noteworthy that \$2.6 billion in offshore oil and gas leases were sold for the Chuckchi Sea nearly a full month after the bear decision was due.

"That lease sale could not have gone forward without additional environmental review had the polar bear been listed when it should have been back in early January," she said.

The Bush administration has said a decision is coming soon.

But for Siegel, soon just isn't soon enough.

"This lawsuit is about ending the delay," she said. "If we do nothing - polar bears will go extinct and we simply won't stand by and let the administration condemn the administration condemn polar bears to extinction by doing nothing about global warming."

Siegel believes the delay may be happening because it puts the administration in an awkward position.

Choosing to protect polar bears will mean acknowledging the role greenhouse gasses play in climate change and working to reduce their impact.

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