



U.S. Delays Polar Bear Listing Decision

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for [National Geographic News](#)

The U.S. government today postponed a final decision on whether to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

The delay stems from a backlog of work, not scientific uncertainty or a pending lease sale for oil and gas development in polar bear habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said during a telephone press briefing.

The service said it will miss its original Wednesday deadline but plans to make a formal recommendation within 30 days. No firm decision date was set, however.

Evaluation of a suite of reports from the U.S. Geological Survey that concluded two-thirds of the world's polar bears could go extinct by 2050 prompted the delay, the service said.

The studies were completed last September, but in response, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reopened and extended a public comment period on the findings.

Evaluation of the new science and the comments it generated is still going on, Dale Hall, director of the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said during the briefing.

“While we do not like missing time lines that are called for under the act, it is far more important to us to get a right answer and have it explained properly to the public,” he said. “So we’ll be needing to take some extra time here to finish that up.”

Scott Bergen is a landscape ecologist with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society and a contributing author to the U.S. Geological Survey polar bear studies. He said he is disappointed with the delay.

“At least with the scientific team I was involved with, it was pretty clear, especially with the polar bear population that exists in Alaska, that they are in danger,” he said. “I’m hoping this delay is temporary and only 30 days.”

Lawsuit and Suspicions

A coalition of environmental groups said today they will file a lawsuit notice Wednesday to enforce the deadline. The groups are suspicious the delay is political, not scientific.

For example, the U.S. Mineral Management Service announced last week that it will hold a final lease sale for oil and gas development in

the Chukchi Sea off the northwestern Alaskan coast, which is polar bear habitat. The sale is slated to happen on February 6.

“It’s very suspicious,” said Kassie Siegel, [climate program director at the Center for Biological Diversity](#) and lead author of the 2005 petition to list the polar bear.

“It’s our experience that when [listing decisions get delayed in Washington, D.C.](#), it’s always a bad thing, because [Washington, D.C.](#), is where the political interference happens,” she added.

Fish and Wildlife director Hall said the lease sale has no bearing on the delay and added that any action related to the lease sale would still have to comply with the Endangered Species Act and other environmental regulations.

Scientific Certainty

In addition, Hall noted, there is no strong scientific uncertainty regarding the U.S. Geological Survey findings that two-thirds of polar bears face a risk of extinction by 2050.

“It’s just unfortunately one of those times I’ll have to tell you we’ll have to miss a deadline in order to provide the quality and product that we believe needs to be provided,” he said.

Alaska Governor Sara Palin wrote in a January 5 op-ed for the New York Times that “there is insufficient evidence that polar bears are in danger of becoming extinct within the foreseeable future—the trigger for protection under the Endangered Species Act.”

The Center for Biological Diversity’s Siegel said all science has a degree of uncertainty but that uncertainty is very low for the polar bear.

Polar bears eat mostly seals and other fatty marine animals that they

hunt from sea ice. The bears prefer to hunt from ice that hangs over shallow continental shelf waters, which contain more prey than deeper waters offshore.

But summer sea ice in the polar bears’ Arctic habitat is shrinking and retreating farther and farther from the coastline, which crimps the bears’ ability to forage efficiently. Some bears are starving to death.

Scientists believe human-caused global warming is contributing to the decline in sea ice habitat.

Saving polar bears, therefore, requires human action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, Siegel noted. But taking such action is a political decision.

“We know what we have to do to save polar bears,” she said. “We just have to start doing it.”