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OPINION

Governor has wrong information on polar bears' plight

By KASSIE SIEGEL

Gov. Sarah Palin's opposition to Endangered Species Act protection for the polar bear is, unfortunately, premised on misinformation. In her commentary for the Daily News, Gov. Palin states that "the polar bear population in the southern Beaufort Sea off Alaska's North Slope has been stable for 20 years." This is simply incorrect. The Polar Bear Specialist Group, the world's pre-eminent scientific body for the study of polar bears, classifies this population as declining.

Global warming's impact on polar bears is dramatic and clearly adverse. Bears are drowning, starving, and even resorting to cannibalism as their sea-ice habitat rapidly melts away and they are denied access to the ice seals that make up the bulk of their diet. As the sea ice declines, significantly fewer polar bear cubs survive and those that do are smaller.

Leading polar bear experts led by the U.S. Geological Survey recently completed a series of reports on the species for the Endangered Species Act listing process. They concluded that if "business as usual" greenhouse gas emissions continue, we will lose two-thirds of the world's polar bears, including all of the bears in Alaska, by 2050.

The polar bear is clearly "in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range" and should be protected under the Endangered Species Act, our nation's safety net for plants and animals on the brink of extinction. The act, passed more than 30 years ago by a near-unanimous Congress and signed into law by a Republican president, was then, and remains today, the world's most effective law protecting biodiversity. The act is the best hope for the survival of the polar bear.

The greenhouse pollution that causes global warming is the single most important threat to the polar bear.

Therefore, the endangered species law should help to limit some sources of greenhouse pollution, particularly those approved by federal agencies. Once the polar bear is listed, a federal agency approving a major new source of greenhouse pollution, such as new offshore oil leases, would have to take steps to ensure that its approval will not contribute to the bear's extinction.

Listing polar bears under the Endangered Species Act is obviously not the full solution to global warming. But it is an important step. Already, the listing process has greatly raised the profile of the species' plight and the Arctic meltdown. In the absence of the federal greenhouse gas pollution limits that we so desperately need, it is critical to enforce all the laws already on the books that can help advance solutions. The Endangered Species Act is one such law.

We need to list the polar bear, and we need to muster the courage and determination as a society to rapidly slash greenhouse pollution. Our barriers are political, not technological, because the solutions to this problem -- things like increasing energy efficiency and increasing our use of renewable energy -- exist today.

Alaska is feeling the brunt of global warming impacts, and should also be at the forefront of solutions. Gov. Palin should stop expending time and resources opposing the listing and instead work on helping Alaskans, as well as Alaskan species like the polar bear, cope with the devastating impacts that are already upon us and certain to come.

Kassie Siegel is climate, air and energy program director for the Center for Biological Diversity. She is the lead author of the petition to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act.