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OPINION

Polar bear needs protection

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Alaska's Gov. Sarah Palin, a persistent advocate of increased oil and gas drilling, doesn't want the polar bear protected under the Endangered Species Act. Her position is not surprising: There is a clear conflict between saving polar bears and continuing to massively pollute the atmosphere with greenhouse gases. We can't do both.

What is surprising is Palin's attempt to cloak her position in science. She would have us believe that polar bears are thriving, with the southern Beaufort Sea population off Alaska's North Slope being stable for 20 years. Also, that the melting of the Arctic due to global warming is not foreseeable.

The international Polar Bear Specialist Group -- the pre-eminent scientific body on polar bear science -- has determined that the southern Beaufort Sea population is declining. Bears are drowning, starving and even resorting to cannibalism as their sea ice habitat rapidly melts away. Without sea ice, they are unable to hunt ice seals that make up the bulk of their diet. As the sea ice declines, fewer cubs survive, and those that do are smaller.

To help the Department of the Interior make a decision on whether to list the polar bear as an endangered species, the U.S. Geological Survey recently completed a series of scientific reports concluding that if "business as usual" greenhouse gas emissions continue, we will lose two-thirds of the world's polar bears, including all Alaska bears, by 2050.

Palin's view of the implications of Endangered Species Act protection is as skewed as her scientific denial. The ESA, she says, "is not the correct tool to address climate change -- the act itself actually prohibits any consideration of broader issues."

The ESA is one of our nation's most powerful and successful environmental laws. Ninety-three percent of species put under its care have increased in population size or remained stable since being protected. In Alaska, that includes the Arctic peregrine falcon, American peregrine falcon, Aleutian Canada goose, and gray whale, whose populations grew to the point of recovery and have been removed from the endangered list. It also includes the blue, bowhead, humpback and fin whales, the short-tailed albatross, and the eastern Steller sea lion which are on a recovery trajectory but are not there yet.

Though written 34 years ago, the ESA is relatively timeless because Congress did not specify any particular issues to be inside or outside its purview. Instead, the law applies to all federal actions and to state and private actions that harm endangered species. The act does not mention global warming -- or most other threats -- preferring instead to let scientists determine the relevant issues under "the best available scientific information" standard.

Scientists have determined that global warming is a threat to be addressed by the ESA. From endangered songbirds in Hawaii to salmon in California and Maine, whooping cranes in Texas, dune plants on the Atlantic coast and the Indiana bat in the Midwest, scientists are already applying the ESA

to the threat of global warming. In New Mexico, they are requiring a proposed coal-fired power plant to address its contribution to global greenhouse gas pollution. Palin can deny it, but the train has already left the station.

Greenhouse gas pollution is driving global warming, which in turn is the single-most important threat to polar bears. Once the polar bear is listed, federal agencies approving a major new source of greenhouse gas pollution, such as new offshore oil leases, will have to take steps to ensure that approval would not contribute to the bear's extinction.

Listing the polar bear as an endangered species is obviously not the full solution to global warming. We also must muster the societal courage and determination to rapidly slash greenhouse gas pollution. But listing is a crucial first step; one that will encourage additional steps.

If aggressively employed, existing technology would allow us to immediately increase energy efficiency and cut greenhouse gas pollution. Palin should join the governors of California, Arizona, New York and Vermont in promoting these solutions instead of fighting a rear guard battle against climate science.

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