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U.S. delays global warming decision on polar bears

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WASHINGTON – The United States delayed a decision on whether global warming threatens polar bears, saying Monday new data and public comment required more time. Environmentalists vowed to sue for quicker action.

The deadline for deciding whether to list the big white bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act is Wednesday but Dale Hall, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, told reporters it would take as much as a month more to analyze all the information.

This is the first time global warming has been a factor in proposing threatened status for any U.S. species, Hall said, and that has added to the complexity of the decision.

Polar bears depend on sea ice as a platform for hunting seals, and without it, the bears could be forced onto land, where they are inefficient hunters. As sea ice melts, the bears are forced to swim long distances and footage of polar bears drowning has fueled the debate over their fate.

The act indicates the one allowable reason for a delay in adding a species to the list is “substantial scientific uncertainty” but Hall denied in a telephone news conference that this was the reason.

“I’m not saying that there is scientific uncertainty under the act and it’s unfortunately one of those times ... we’ll have to miss the deadline in order to provide the quality product that needs to be provided,” he said.

POLAR BEARS’ ‘FORESEEABLE FUTURE’

While all the other 1,300 or so species on the list were clearly threatened by deforestation or vanishing wetlands, Hall said the climate connection to the polar bear case required help from government scientists to understand the various impacts of global warming.

The Endangered Species Act defines a threatened species as one likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. Hall said the scientific data would “help us understand that ‘foreseeable future’ question: what’s going to happen in the next 45 years, because that’s really the question.”

A key piece of data under consideration is a September report from the U.S. Geological Survey that predicted polar bears could disappear from places where Arctic sea ice is melting fastest, including the northern coast of Alaska.

Two-thirds of the world’s polar bears could be gone by 2050 if predictions about melting sea ice hold true, the report said. The ice is melting at least in part because of human-caused climate change, scientists have said.

Within minutes of the government’s announcement of the delay, environmental groups vowed to sue to enforce the deadline in the polar bear case.

“The Bush administration has squandered seven years denying the devastating scientific evidence of global warming,” Kert Davies of Greenpeace USA said in a statement. “Stalling has cost us dearly, putting the polar bear at risk of extinction and jeopardizing the future welfare of billions of people around the world.”

Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Center for Biological Diversity said in a joint statement they plan to start the legal process Wednesday with a formal notice to sue, as required under the Endangered Species Act.