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Environmental groups sue U.S. over polar bears

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By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A trio of environmental groups sued the U.S. government on Monday for failing to meet a legal deadline to decide if polar bears should be considered threatened by climate change under the Endangered Species Act.

"It's up to a federal court to throw this incredible animal a lifeline," said Andrew Wetzler of the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the plaintiffs. "We need urgent action from this administration to protect the polar bear and reduce greenhouse gas pollution, not continued delay."

Polar bears live only in the Arctic and depend on sea ice as a platform for hunting seals. A report by the U.S. Geological Survey said that two-thirds of the world's polar bears -- some 16,000 -- could be gone by 2050 if predictions about melting sea ice hold true.

This is the first time global warming has been a factor in proposing a threatened status for any U.S. species.

The Bush administration was originally supposed to issue a final decision on the polar bear case on January 9, but requested a delay of a month or so. This past Sunday was the latest final deadline for a decision.

In announcing the January delay, Dale Hall, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the notion of climate change as a cause added to the complexity of the decision.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, Greenpeace and the Center for Biological Diversity filed their lawsuit in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, seeking to compel the administration to issue a final decision immediately.

The decision rests with the U.S. Interior Department. There was no immediate response on Monday to phone calls to the department after the suit was filed, but a spokesman said beforehand that the lawsuit was expected.

"We were put on notice about 60 days ago that certain organizations intended to file a lawsuit and we've obviously not published a decision ... so a lawsuit is not a surprise to us," Interior spokesman Shane Wolf said by telephone.

Wolf said on Friday that the department would respond to the suit "in a timely manner."

While the decision on the polar bears' possible protected status was postponed, the Interior Department went ahead on February 6 with a sale of oil and gas leases in the Chukchi Sea off the Alaskan coast, which includes large swaths of polar bear habitat.

Also on Friday, the Interior Department's inspector general's office launched an investigation into the actions surrounding the listing of the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act.

(Editing by Eric Beech)

(For more Reuters information on the environment, see [here](#))