

Groups cite oil leases in U.S. delay on rating polar bear's status

[Jane Kay, Chronicle Environment Writer](#)

Tuesday, January 8, 2008

Environmental groups fear that political meddling and a rush to sell oil leases in Arctic waters are behind the Bush administration's announcement Monday that it will miss a legal deadline to determine whether to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act.

Federal law requires U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make a final decision on protections for the white furry marine mammal by Wednesday, a year from when the agency first proposed that it be considered a threatened species.

Climate scientists predict that floating polar ice will disappear by midcentury, leaving the bear without food and habitat. Two-thirds of the population could disappear by 2050, scientists say.

The polar bear has become a symbol of how dramatic planetary changes threaten the homes of both humans and wildlife.

In announcing the delay of up to a month, Fish and Wildlife Service Director H. Dale Hall said Monday that the agency needs more time to finish its work on the decision. He said new U.S. Geological Survey studies on the size of the polar bear population and sea ice trends required an extended public comment period. The agency already has considered 670,000 comments on the listing.

"I can't tell you how we're leaning one way or another. We're going to be diligent about following the science," Hall said.

The bear is the first species that the agency has considered protecting because of threats posed by global warming.

"That's why this one has been so taxing and challenging to us," Hall said during a national teleconference.

But major environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace, as well as some congressional leaders are suspicious that the delay means more than just taking 30 days longer to hear the news.

The administration has long resisted conclusions by international scientific bodies that global warming is a human-caused phenomenon, and it has actively opposed regulating carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases linked to the warming atmosphere and oceans.

Environmental groups fear that the polar bear decision has been purposefully delayed to allow a first-time oil lease sale to go forward Feb. 6 in Alaska's pristine Chukchi Sea, which provides one-tenth of the habitat for the world's polar bears.

Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., chairman of the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, criticized the administration's decision to proceed with the 29 million-acre lease sale in the Chukchi.

"On the one hand, the Interior Department is dragging its feet on protecting the polar bear, while opening up new oil and gas drilling in sensitive polar bear habitats on the other," Markey said in a statement.

Andrew Wexler, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Chicago, said, "The one-month delay comes at a time that is very fortuitous for oil and gas companies that want to drill in the Chukchi."

If the bear were listed before the lease-sale decision, Interior Department's Minerals Management Service might have to delay or stop the sale, Wexler said.

Melanie Duchin, a Greenpeace campaigner in Alaska, agreed that the delay is highly suspect.

"You can't both protect the bear's habitat and drill in it at the same time," Duchin said.

"The sale would set up a one-two punch for the polar bear. On one hand, it would expose the bears to oil spills and all manner of industrial disturbance that comes along with exploration, drilling and transportation. Once those fossil fuels are burned, they exacerbate global warming and melt the polar bear's sea-ice habitat," she said.

Some groups say a delay can be used by political appointees to change the decisions of polar bear scientists.

"Over and over again, Bush appointees have rewritten scientific decisions under the (act). We've had these repeatedly overturned by courts," said Kassie Siegel, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Former Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald resigned last year after an inspector general's report said she manipulated agency biologists' work, bullied scientists and colluded with industry lobbyists.

"We still have political appointees in these agencies, and political people should not be getting their hands on this," Siegel said.

The completed work on the decision by the polar bear scientists in the Alaska field office was sent to headquarters Dec. 14, according to Bruce Woods, an agency spokesman in Anchorage, Alaska.

In speaking with reporters, Hall answered questions regarding the timing of the delay and the upcoming lease sale in the Chukchi Sea.

If the polar bear were listed, the lease would have to meet the protections under the act and other laws, Hall said.

Hall said he hasn't spoken to White House staff about the polar bear decision. He discusses it with Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, he said.

Hugh Vickery, a spokesman for the Interior Department, said, "They're using the extra time to get it right. This decision will be made in accordance with the Endangered Species Act based on the best scientific and commercial data."

Online resource

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Proposal to list the polar bear:

links.sfgate.com/ZBZI

Get involved

The official comment period for whether the polar bear should be considered a threatened species is closed. However, you can share your opinion about the newly announced delay by contacting the U.S. Department of the Interior, which oversees the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Who: Dirk Kempthorne, secretary of the interior

Address: 1849 C St. NW, Washington, DC 20240

Phone: (202) 208-3100 or (800) 344-9453

Log comments at: www.doi.gov/contact.html

E-mail Jane Kay at jkay@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/01/08/MN60UAQFJ.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 3** of the SanFranciscoChronicle

