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U.S. accused of silencing experts on polar bears, climate change

Scientists told not to speak officially at conferences

by JANE KAY

Chronicle Environment Writer

The federal agency responsible for protecting Arctic polar bears has barred two Alaska scientists from speaking about polar bears, climate change or sea ice at international meetings in the next few weeks, a move that environmentalists say is censorship.

The rule was issued last month by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service but was made public this week. The federal government has proposed listing the polar bear as a threatened species, and the wildlife agency is receiving public comment on the proposal.

"It's a gag order," said Deborah Williams, a former high-level Interior Department official in Anchorage, Alaska, who received documents on Wednesday from Alaska scientists who chose to remain unnamed. The documents make the subjects of polar bears, climate change and sea ice off limits to all scientists who haven't been cleared to speak on the topics.

Two of the memos are copies of those prepared for Craig Perham and Janet E. Hohn, who are traveling

to Russia and Norway this month and in April. The scientists "will not be speaking on or responding to these issues" of climate change, polar bears and sea ice, the memos say. Before any trip, such a memo must be sent to the administrator of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington.

According to the memos, agency scientists must obtain a memorandum designating which official, if any, is allowed to respond to questions, particularly about polar bears, and include "a statement of assurance that these individuals understand

the Administration's position on these issues."

Tina Kreisher, communications director of the Interior Department, which oversees the wildlife agency, said in an interview Thursday that the government isn't trying to prevent scientists from talking about their findings -- but doesn't want them to make policy statements.

At a news conference, Fish and Wildlife Director H. Dale Hall denied that the memos were a form of censorship. He described the content of the documents as part of



Chronicle / Kat Wade

A polar bear and her 2-year-old cub feed on a bowhead whale carcass left behind by hunters on Alaska's Barter Island.

Chronicle photo, 2005, by Kat Wade

a policy to establish an agenda and the appropriate spokesperson for international meetings.

Considering the high-profile nature of climate change and the issues that might come up, it was prudent to know ahead of time what everyone was going to discuss, he said.

“We are not gagging scientists,” said Hall. They can speak with other scientists at international gatherings in conversations or at dinner but may not speak for the United States government in a formal setting, he said. The agency would frown on their going to news conferences in a host country, he added.

When asked for the administration’s position with which the Alaska scientists would have to be familiar, Hall said, “The Earth is warming, and we have to understand how to deal with that and to slow down greenhouse gases and manage the changes that will occur.”

The agency has taken steps to evaluate whether the polar bear should be listed and has significant questions about scientific studies, including those dealing with when sea ice will melt and the effects on the bear, he said.

Environmentalists who petitioned for the new protections for polar bears hope that a listing would force mandatory limits to greenhouse gases. At present, the administration prefers voluntary programs to cut emissions and has taken the position that carbon dioxide, the predominant greenhouse gas, can’t be regulated as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act.

Kieran Suckling, policy director of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that submitted the petition to list the polar bear, said

muzzling of scientists at international meetings isn’t appropriate.

“That type of memo might be appropriate for the State Department and purely political issues,” he said. “What we’re dealing with here is science. How many polar bears are there? Why are they going extinct? What is the cause of the ice melting? It’s completely inappropriate to ban scientists from talking about science.”

Williams, an attorney who received the documents about rules for scientists’ speech, was special assistant to the secretary of the Interior under the Clinton administration for six years. She now heads an environmental consulting firm, Alaska Conservation Solutions.

“I worked very closely with Fish and Wildlife and other Interior agencies, and a memo like this is truly inconceivable,” she said. “This is an issue of international significance, and you want your professional public servants to be able to discuss these issues. It is unconscionable to gag them.”

The Bush administration has been under fire for several years for allegedly trying to curb the speech of government scientists who produce studies that contradict the administration’s positions, particularly on global warming.

Scientists in the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have been chastised for speaking to reporters, and some have been asked to submit papers and lectures to high-level managers for review. Political appointees at NASA have turned down journalists’ requests for interviews with scientists, and the Minerals Management Service

has allowed journalists to interview scientists, including on polar bear observations, only if the agency could record them.

The agencies challenged scientists over studies revealing negative effects of oil development on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the drownings of polar bears possibly associated with shrinking sea ice.

The beloved furry Arctic animal has become a symbol for the dire effects of a warming world. Four dead polar bears floating in Arctic Ocean waters, which may be attributed to the long swim from the diminishing sea ice to land, were shown by former Vice President Al Gore in his documentary, “An Inconvenient Truth.”

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