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Global warming mascot left in the cold by delays

BY Valerie Richardson

Temperatures are rising over the delay in deciding whether to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act.

"The polar bear cannot wait much longer," said Kassie Siegel, climate program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the three litigants. "As our greenhouse emissions increase and the Arctic sea ice melts, the window of opportunity to save the polar [bear] is closing rapidly."

The problem, say Bush administration officials, is that the polar bear is no longer just a shaggy, white mammal with a taste for seal. The species has become a proxy for the debate on global warming, and the implications of a listing decision stretch far beyond its U.S. habitat in northern Alaska.

"The world is watching," Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Valerie Fellows said. "It's been fascinating. In the eyes of the public, the polar bear has really become the face of global climate change."

The Fish and Wildlife Service proposed listing the polar bear in January 2007 and held three public comment periods and three hearings

on the proposal. The agency's self-imposed deadline was Jan. 9, but speculation now has it that the decision could be delayed until early summer.

Mrs. Fellows said that missing such a deadline, particularly in a sensitive or complicated case like this, was hardly unusual.

"This is not the first deadline we've missed nor will it be the last," said Mrs. Fellows, citing the service's "overwhelming" litigation load and insufficient staff. "I don't want to say it's frequent, but it's not infrequent."

The agency received 670,000 responses during its public-comment period, shattering all previous records with regard to species listing.

"That's an astronomical amount of information," Mrs. Fellows said.

The sheer volume of information, coupled with evolving research on climate change, has made it impossible for agency biologists to issue a timely ruling, she said. What's more, any decision is expected to be challenged immediately in court.

"No matter what decision the service makes, we would anticipate a lawsuit, one way or the other,"

Mrs. Fellows said. "So the rule we put together has to be the most scientifically sound one possible, based on the best available science."

At the heart of the debate is whether the polar bear's numbers are likely to suffer if global temperatures rise. Polar bears depend on sea ice in the northern Arctic regions, but some studies say summer sea ice is shrinking rapidly.

A U.S. Geological Survey study released in September projected a 42 percent reduction in summer sea ice — where the bear hunts, dens and mates — and concluded that the animal's population could shrink by two-thirds in the next 50 years.

Critics of the proposed listing point out that the polar bear's numbers have increased significantly in the past 30 years, and that the bear has survived long periods of Arctic temperatures higher than today's, including one just 1,000 years ago.

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, a Republican, has vigorously opposed the proposed listing, arguing that the bear already gets significant protection under a number of conservation laws and international accords. In Alaska, only certain American Indian tribes can hunt

the polar bear, and then only for subsistence.

The state is home to the only two polar bear populations in the U.S.: the Beaufort Sea group and the Chukchi Sea group. The bear is also found in the Arctic coastal regions of Canada, Greenland, Norway

and Russia, although 70 percent of its 20,000-to-25,000 worldwide population is estimated to live in the North American sectors of the Arctic.

Free-market groups argue that such a listing would have no impact on polar bear habitat but could deal a

devastating blow to the economy. If the agency's decision links global warming to fossil-fuel emissions, critics say, activities ranging from operating a power plant to driving a car anywhere in the country could be seen as threats to the polar bear.