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Polar Bear Habitat Proposed for Alaska

By John M. Broder

WASHINGTON — The Interior Department on Thursday proposed designating more than 200,000 square miles of land, sea and ice along the northern coast of Alaska as critical habitat for the shrinking polar bear population.

The area, the largest single designation of protected habitat for any species, encompasses the entire range of the two polar bear populations that exist on American land and territorial waters. Government scientists estimate that there are roughly 3,500 bears in the two groups, known the Chukchi Sea and the Southern Beaufort Sea populations.

Officials said the bears' range was shrinking because of the disappearance of sea ice linked to global warming.

"Proposing critical habitat for this iconic species is one step in the right direction to help this species stave off extinction, recognizing that the greatest threat to the polar bear is the melting of sea ice caused by climate change," said Thomas L. Strickland, the assistant interior secretary for fish, wildlife and parks.

In May 2008 the Interior Department declared, under the terms of the Endangered Species Act, that the polar bear was threatened with extinction. The Bush administration found that the bears' habitat was shrinking because of melting ice, along with commercial activities like shipping, oil and gas operations, hunting and tourism.

Yet Bush administration officials said at the time that they did not intend to use the Endangered Species Act to address global warming, a policy affirmed by the Obama administration.

"The Endangered Species Act is not the appropriate tool to directly address the carbon emissions that are root cause of climate change," Mr. Strickland said in a conference call Thursday afternoon. He said the government was dealing with climate change through legislation, regulation and international negotiation.

Mr. Strickland and other officials said that the bears' habitat was not being set aside as a refuge and that oil and gas exploration and other activities could continue under the terms of the species act and other laws. He noted that the Shell Oil Company had been given permission this week to drill in the proposed protected area.

"This will not be a significant additional burden on the industry," Mr. Strickland said.

The new designation requires a government agency or commercial interest to show that any proposed activity, including oil drilling or shipping, would not destroy or adversely affect the bears' habitat or accelerate the extinction of the species.

Alaska officials are already challenging the federal protections afforded polar bears, saying they threaten the state's oil industry and broader economy.

The Interior Department's polar bear policy has been under fire from environmental advocates as well.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, via Associated Press

A polar bear and her cubs rest on the pack ice in the Beaufort Sea in northern Alaska.

When the department listed the polar bear as threatened last year, it did not simultaneously designate critical habitat as the law requires. Conservation groups sued, and Thursday's announcement was part of a settlement of the case.

Some wildlife advocates said the announcement did not go far enough.

"If polar bears are to survive in a rapidly melting Arctic, we need to protect their critical habitat, not turn it into a polluted industrial zone," said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel with the Center for Biological Diversity. "The Interior Department is schizophrenic, declaring its intent to protect polar bear habitat in the Arctic, yet simultaneously sacrificing that habitat to feed our unsustainable addiction to oil."

The habitat rule will be open to public comment for 60 days, and the agency will conduct additional scientific and economic studies of the proposal's impact. The agency is required to publish a final critical-habitat rule by June 30, 2010.