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Action on polar bears might curb oil drilling

By Associated Press

The Obama administration said last week that it plans to designate more than 200,000 square miles in Alaska and off its coast as “critical habitat” for polar bears, an action that could add restrictions to future offshore drilling for oil and gas.

Federal law bars agencies from taking actions that may adversely affect critical habitat and interfere with polar bear recovery.

Assistant Interior Secretary Thomas Strickland called the habitat designation a step in the right direction to help polar bears stave off extinction, while recognizing that the greatest threat to the bear is the melting of Arctic sea ice caused by climate change.

“As we move forward with a comprehensive energy and climate strategy, we will continue to work to protect the polar bear and its fragile environment,” Strickland said at a news conference.

The total area proposed for critical habitat designation would cover about 200,541 square miles -- about half in the Chukchi Sea off Alaska’s northwest coast. About 93 percent of the area proposed for the polar bear is sea ice, with the remaining 7 percent made up of barrier islands and land-based dens of snow and ice.

Designation as critical habitat would not, in itself, bar oil or gas development but would make consideration of the effect on polar bears and their habitat an explicit part of any government-approved activity.

The Bush administration last year declared polar bears “threatened,” or likely to become endangered. The May 2008 order cited the bear’s need for sea ice, the dramatic loss of such ice in recent decades and computer models that suggest sea ice is likely to recede further in the future.



A polar bear rests with her cubs on the ice in the Beaufort Sea. (Steve Amstrup/Associated Press)

Environmental groups hailed the habitat announcement but noted that it came in the same week that the Interior Department approved a plan to drill exploratory wells in the Beaufort Sea off Alaska’s north coast. The proposed drilling sites are within the area proposed for critical habitat designation.

“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 of the Center for Biological Diversity.