

This AP article isn't running all that widely, but I think its probably what prompted the SLT editorial....

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Web posted April 29, 2007

## Politicians question polar bear protection

*Lawmaker says state being used as a 'pawn' in warming debate*

**By DAN JOLING**

*The Associated Press*

ANCHORAGE - A proposal to list polar bears as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act has Alaska politicians seeing green, as in the color of money that could be lost if a bear recovery plan hinders the state's resource development.

Gov. Sarah Palin and a majority of legislators strongly oppose the listing, and say the acknowledged intent behind it - curbing greenhouse gas emissions nationally - should be debated in another forum, not a law aimed at protecting animals.

"I'm not comfortable with Alaska being used as a pawn in that game," said state Rep. Craig Johnson, R-Anchorage, a leading opponent.

But the rules of the listing game call for a decision to be based on science, and the official Palin administration response says polar bears are thriving, that global warming science is inconclusive and that bears are not threatened by human activity - a claim conservation groups have labeled "ridiculous."

"No one who purports to have even a moderate understanding of the climate literature could possibly fail to be aware of this research, and therefore I must conclude that it is a deliberate attempt to mislead," said Kassie Siegel, an attorney for the Center Biological Diversity, and the author of the original 154-page petition laying out the original case for listing polar bears.

Polar bears are classified as marine mammals because they spend most of their lives on sea ice, using it to hunt seals, breed and travel. The proposed listing is based to a large extent on the threat to sea ice.

The National Snow and Ice Data Center at the University of Colorado last September reported minimum summer sea ice for 2006 at 2.2 million square miles. Since satellite monitoring began in 1979, the summer sea ice minimum has declined 8.59 percent per decade, a rate that will make the Arctic Ocean ice free by 2060, according to NSIDC research scientist Julienne Stroeve.

The Fish and Wildlife Service in December determined that listing polar bears as threatened - in danger of extinction in a significant portion of its range - was warranted, pending further review and public testimony. Palin, elected in November, claims the agency did not use the best scientific and commercial information available.

The official state testimony claims sea ice is melting, but the Fish and Wildlife Service picked out the most extreme climate models to predict future effects. State officials say scientists disagree over human's role in warming, a more comprehensive evaluation is needed and that polar bears can adapt to less ice.

"The application for this listing is based on the unfounded, unproven scientific hypotheses that climate change is caused by human activity, in the form of increased release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere," said House Speaker John Harris, a Valdez Republican.

That's a view in contrast to world climate experts who made up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They reported in February that global warming "very likely" is caused by human use of fossil fuels such as oil, gas and coal.

Environmental groups say that unless countermeasures are taken, warming will melt the prime habitat of polar bears. Even if sea ice does not disappear, they say, warming could push its edge well beyond the continental shelf, creating a watery barrier or hazard for polar bears trying to reach sea ice or land.

Sea ice loss so far has not meant fewer polar bears, Johnson said. According to testimony submitted by Palin administration officials, even a 30 percent decline in the total population of polar bears within 35 to 50 years, as predicted by the polar bear group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the world's largest conservation network, is not enough to warrant a listing. Such a drop "does not

result in a population that is threatened with extinction," they contend.

Polar bears have survived two historic periods of warming and likely can do it again, Johnson said. He not so sure, he said, that Alaska could survive the polar bear being listed.

Alaska's economy is fueled by petroleum and elected officials fear that a polar bear recovery plan, plus the third-party lawsuits it would spawn, could gum up Arctic resource development and the next hoped-for boom, a pipeline to carry 35 trillion cubic feet of natural gas to customers in the Lower 48 states.

Roughly 85 percent of Alaska's general fund money comes from royalties and taxes on the oil industry, but the trans-Alaska pipeline has for years been running less than half full as reserves dwindle down. It has been political suicide for a politician to suggest instituting an income tax or tapping the earnings of the Alaska Permanent Fund, a \$38 billion bank account that provides residents with an annual check. So the Legislature and the governor are pushing for a natural gas pipeline that will provide continued pain-free income, not to mention jobs.

"It is important that we prevent listing the polar bear as threatened, not only because the designation is not clearly supported by science, but because it will be used as leverage to stop development projects across the country, including our own natural gas pipeline," said Sen. Gary Wilken, R-Fairbanks.

Conservation groups call the state's position an attempt to manufacture uncertainty where none exists.

"Overall, the state of Alaska has completely lost any credibility it might have had on this issue by submitting this outrageous letter," Siegel said.

Deborah Williams, a former Interior Department special assistant for Alaska and now president of Alaska Conservation Solutions, a group aimed at pursuing solutions for climate change, called the state response misguided and regrettable.

"This is the state of Alaska," she said. "They ought to be speaking from the most complete set of scientific evidence that have, and they ought to speak to it fairly."

The state's submission fails to counter or even address recent Alaska polar bear research showing fewer Beaufort Sea cubs surviving, smaller body weights and skull sizes, plus drownings, cannibalism and starvation, she said. That's in contrast to the Fish and Wildlife Service's own initial review published Jan. 9 in the Federal Register.

The agency is sifting through more than more than 400,000 electronic comments plus boxes of written comment lining a wall in an Anchorage office. Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne is required to render his decision by January.