

Polar Bears May Be Listed as Threatened in the USA

WASHINGTON, DC, January 2, 2007 (ENS) - "Polar bears are one of nature's ultimate survivors, able to live and thrive in one of the world's harshest environments. But we are concerned the polar bears' habitat may literally be melting," Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne said last week, proposing to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.



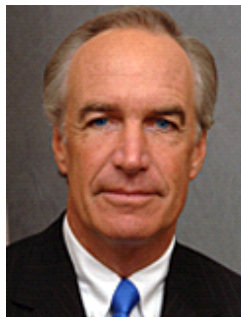
The Arctic ice on which polar bears depend for survival is melting out from under them. (Photo courtesy [VOA](#))

A listing would mean that any activities undertaken by federal government agencies could not undermine the survival of the species.

The decision to study listing the polar bear as threatened is the result of a lawsuit by three environmental groups, who argued that the Bush administration was slow to respond to the effect of climate change on polar bears. The government's announcement meets a deadline ordered by the court. Conservation groups say they are pleased with the listing proposal.

"This is a watershed decision in terms of way we deal with global warming in this country," said **Kassie Siegel, a lawyer at the Center for Biological Diversity**, one of the plaintiff organizations.

Federal agencies will use the next 12 months to gather and analyze information and assess the reliability of scientific models before making a final decision on whether or not to list the polar bear as threatened, Kempthorne said.



Dirk Kempthorne was confirmed as Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior on May 26, 2006. Previously, he was governor of Idaho. (Photo courtesy Office of the Secretary)

"Based on current analysis, there are concerns about the effect of receding sea ice on polar bear populations," said

Kemphorne. "I am directing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey to aggressively work with the public and the scientific community over the next year to broaden our understanding of what is happening with the species."

Polar bears are already protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which prohibits the taking or importing of marine mammals and their parts or products.

The species is also protected by international treaties involving countries in the bear's range.

In early December, Congress passed the United States-Russia Polar Bear Conservation and Management Act of 2006, implementing a treaty with Russia designed to conserve polar bears shared between the two countries. President George W. Bush is expected to sign this legislation into law.

The listing proposal cites the threat to polar bear populations caused by receding sea ice, which bears use as a platform to hunt for prey.

In recommending a proposed listing, the Fish and Wildlife Service, FWS, used scientific models that predict the impact of the loss of ice on bear populations over the next few decades.

"We have sufficient scientific evidence of a threat to the species to warrant proposing it for listing, but we still have a lot of work to do to enhance our scientific models and analyses before making a final decision," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall.

Scientific observations show a decline in late summer Arctic sea ice to the extent of 7.7 percent per decade and in the perennial sea ice area of 9.8 percent per decade since 1978.



Two polar bears are stranded on a chunk of melting ice. (Photo by Dan Crosbie courtesy [Canadian Ice Service](#))

There has been a thinning of the Arctic sea ice of 32 percent from the 1960s and 1970s to the 1990s in some local areas. Conservation groups say the decision to study listing the polar bear is overdue.

WWF-US Vice President Bill Eichbaum said, " WWF had supported the petition to classify the polar bear as threatened earlier this year, based on a large volume of compelling information about significant changes in the polar bear's Arctic sea ice habitat."

Rodger Schlickeisen, president of Defenders of Wildlife, said, "At least five of the world's 19 polar bear populations are currently in decline from the complex effects of global warming. At this rate, the World Conservation Union, IUCN, is predicting a 30 percent reduction in polar bear numbers in the next 45 years."

"Degrading pack-ice habitat is making it increasingly difficult for polar bears to find their prey. They are being forced to forage for food on land, where prey is nearly impossible to find," said Dr. Chris Haney, chief scientist with Defenders of Wildlife. "By boosting conservation measures and honestly confronting the issue of global warming, FWS has demonstrated the importance of protecting and recovering this unique arctic mammal."

While the proposal to list the polar bear as threatened cites the threat of receding sea ice, it does not include a scientific analysis of the causes of climate change. The FWS says that analysis is beyond the scope of the Endangered Species Act review process, which focuses on information about the polar bear and its habitat conditions, including reduced sea ice.

But, climate change science and issues of causation are discussed in other analyses undertaken by the Bush Administration, the Department of the Interior said in a statement. "The administration treats climate change very seriously and recognizes the role of greenhouse gases in climate change," the agency said.

"The science of global warming in the Arctic and the impact to polar bears is so clear that not even the Bush administration can any longer deny the science," **Siegel said.** "This is the first major acknowledgment from the Bush administration and it's very encouraging, because we now have to move forward very rapidly to reduce greenhouse gas pollution."

There are 19 polar bear populations in the circumpolar Arctic, containing an estimated total of 20,000 to 25,000 bears.

The western Hudson Bay population of polar bears in Canada has suffered a 22 percent decline. Alaska populations have not experienced a statistically significant decline, but biologists with the Fish and Wildlife Service fear they may face such a decline in the future.

Recent scientific studies of adult polar bears in Canada and in Alaska's Southern Beaufort Sea have shown weight loss and reduced cub survival.

While data are lacking about many populations, the Service suspects that polar bears elsewhere are being similarly affected by the reduction of sea ice.

The Service analyzed the impact of both onshore and offshore oil and gas development on polar bears and determined "they do not pose a threat to the species."



Polar bear in Alaska (Photo courtesy [MMS](#))

The Service also examined the impact of subsistence harvest of polar bears by Alaska native peoples. Such harvest is allowed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and also would be allowed if the polar bear is listed under the Endangered Species Act, unless the Service finds that the harvest is materially and negatively affecting the polar bear.

"Our goal ultimately is to combine the best science available with the power of working hand-in-hand with states, tribes, foreign countries, industry, and other partners to minimize the threats to polar bears and conserve this great icon of the Arctic for future generations," Kempthorne said.

The evidence that Arctic ice is disappearing is coming from a wide range of scientists.

The Arctic ice shelf could completely melt during summer by 2080 because of global warming, according to more than 100 researchers working in 45 institutions in 11 European countries and Russia.

"If the situation evolves like physics predicts, the summertime Arctic shelf will completely disappear by 2080," confirmed Eberhard Fahrback of the Alfred Wegner Institute for Polar and Marine Research in Bremerhaven. This would threaten the entire Arctic food chain, the scientists warn.

The Service invites the public to submit data, information, and comments on the proposed rule. Comments will be accepted on the proposed rule for the next 90 days.

A copy of the proposed rule and other information about the proposal is available on the Service's Marine Mammal website located at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/issues.htm>.