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Salazar reviews 'midnight' endangered species rule

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Associated Press Writer= ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) â U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar says he will make a decision in the coming weeks on whether to overturn a controversial Bush administration regulation that limits the reach of the Endangered Species Act.

The outgoing administration finalized a rule in December that allows federal agencies to issue permits for mining, logging and other activities without consulting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service about endangered wildlife and plants.

President Barack Obama signed a memorandum in March to put the regulation on hold pending a review. Any action on the rule has to be taken by May 9. Salazar expects to make a decision before that.

"We have concerns about it and because of those concerns we're taking a very extensive review of the rule," he told The Associated Press during a visit Friday to Albuquerque.

Salazar stopped at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History to celebrate the recent signing of a massive public lands bill that sets aside millions of acres in several states as wilderness. He told the crowd that energy and climate change will be the most difficult issues facing the nation's leaders in the years to come.

Environmental groups have sent more than 72,000 petitions to Salazar, urging him to overturn the Bush "midnight rules," specifically the rule that makes consultation optional rather than mandatory â as it had been for the last 35 years â and a rule that says greenhouse gases cannot be restricted in an effort to protect polar bears from global warming.

Joe Smyth, a field organizer for Greenpeace, handed Salazar a stuffed polar bear as the secretary left Friday's celebration.

"It's much bigger than the polar bear. The polar bear is just an indicator species of what's happening," Smyth said. "I think what the decision will show, if he makes a strong decision to protect the polar bear from the impacts of global warming, is the Obama administration's commitment to returning science to the decisions made about endangered species protection."

Business and industry groups have argued that the consultation process could result in delays and higher costs for projects, including those that will be funded by federal stimulus money.

Aside from Greenpeace and the Center for Biological Diversity, WildEarth Guardians has been urging its members to send letters to Salazar. The group also filed a lawsuit this week over a handful of species in New Mexico and complained that the Obama administration wasn't taking seriously a backlog in the endangered species program.

Salazar disputed those claims, saying the administration has already started taking steps to tackle energy, climate change and the protection of the landscape.

"We're here to solve problems, not to satisfy one interest group or the other," he said. "I feel very comfortable about the decisions we have made not only on endangered species but on a host of other issues."

Nicole Rosmarino, WildEarth Guardians' wildlife program director, said Friday that Salazar needs to use many approaches â including the Endangered Species Act â to address the impacts of climate change on plants and wildlife.

"From the mightiest beasts, such as the polar bear and Louisiana black bear, to the smallest creatures ... the nation's imperiled species deserve every tool in the toolbox for fighting the climate crisis," she said.