

US sets aside 'critical habitat' for polar bear in Alaska

187,000 square miles in Alaska to be protected, in action that could add restrictions to future offshore drilling for oil and gas

The Associated Press

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION IS SETTING ASIDE 187,000 square miles (484,330 sq. kilometers) in Alaska as a "critical habitat" for polar bears, an action that could add restrictions to future offshore drilling for oil and gas.

The total, which includes large areas of sea ice off the Alaska coast, is about 13,000 square miles (33,670 sq. kilometers), or 8.3 million acres (3.36 million hectares), less than in a preliminary plan released last year.

Tom Strickland, assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks at the Interior Department, said the designation would help polar bears stave off extinction, recognizing that the greatest threat is the melting of Arctic sea ice caused by climate change.

"This critical habitat designation enables us to work with federal partners to ensure their actions within its boundaries do not harm polar bear populations," Strickland said. "We will continue to work toward comprehensive strategies for the long-term survival of this iconic species."

Designation of critical habitat does not in itself block economic activity or other development, but requires federal officials to consider whether a proposed action would adversely affect the polar bear's habitat and interfere with its recovery.

Nearly 95 percent of the designated habitat is sea ice in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas off Alaska's northern coast. Polar bears spend most of their lives on frozen ocean where they hunt seals, breed and travel.

Alaska Gov. Sean Parnell and the state's oil and gas industry had complained that the preliminary plan released last year was too large and dramatically underestimated the potential economic impact. The designation could result in hundreds

of millions of dollars in lost economic activity and tax revenue, they said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said reductions included in the final rule were mostly due to corrections that more accurately reflect the U.S. border in the Arctic Ocean. Five U.S. Air Force radar sites were exempted from the final rule, as were Native Alaskan communities in Barrow and Kaktovik, Alaska.

The Interior Department has declared polar bears "threatened," or likely to become endangered, citing a dramatic loss of sea ice. Officials face a Dec. 23 deadline to explain why the bears were listed as threatened instead of the more protective "endangered."

Kassie Siegel, a lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that has filed a lawsuit to increase protections for the polar bear, hailed the designation of critical habitat.

"Now we need the Obama administration to actually make it mean something so we can write the bear's recovery plan – not its obituary," she said.



A polar bear and her cubs in Alaska. Photograph: AP

Siegel called for the administration to impose a moratorium on oil and gas drilling in bear habitat areas. "An oil spill there would be a catastrophe," she said. "That seems like an understatement."

The Arctic Slope Regional Corp., which advocates for Alaska Native business interests, said in a statement that the decision disproportionately impacts Alaska Natives and called the designation the "wrong tool" for conserving the polar bear because it does nothing to address climate change.

"The burden of the impacts will be felt by the people of the Arctic Slope," said Tara Sweeney, vice president of external affairs for ASRC, which is based in Barrow,

Alaska. "This is a quality of life issue for our people."

Kara Moriarty, deputy director of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association, said the action would hurt oil and gas exploration in Alaska by creating more delays and added costs to projects in what already is a high-cost environment, she said.

"The companies and the industry will be required to go through more permitting and create mitigation measures without a direct benefit to the polar bear or oil and gas development," Moriarty said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service has found over and over again our activities pose no threat to the polar bear."
-AP