

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Tuesday, June 15, 2010

Alaska objects to polar bear habitat plan

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Alaska wildlife officials say they will object to key aspects of federal plans to provide additional protection for polar bears.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will collect testimony in Anchorage Tuesday evening on its proposal to designate critical habitat for the bears, listed two years ago as a threatened species.

The agency has proposed designating 187,166 square miles of U.S. territory as polar bear critical habitat, which means it contains features essential for the conservation of a species and may require special management.

Nearly 95 percent of the designated area is sea ice. Polar bears spend most of their lives on frozen ocean and use it to hunt seals and breed.

Doug Vincent-Lang of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game on Monday restated the state's objection to the size of the designation.

"We certainly don't think the area needs to be the size of California," he said.

The state also contends the federal government underestimated the economic effect of the designation. With other protections in place, the agency estimated only incremental costs - about \$54,000 annually through 2039.

"We think it's in the millions of dollars," Vincent-Lang said.

The Endangered Species Act requires protections to be balanced against economics, he said.

"If you significantly underestimate the cost, it's hard to perform an accurate assessment of the balance between economics and conservation benefits," Vincent-Lang said.

Rebecca Noblin, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, the group that petitioned to list polar bears, praised the designation of critical habitat but said it does address the primary threat to polar bears: global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions, which has melted sea ice.

"They're missing the boat here," Noblin said. "They're not addressing the real threat to the polar bear."

Polar bears were listed by Dirk Kempthorne, Interior secretary under former President George W. Bush, in 2008 because of an alarming loss of summer sea ice in recent decades and climate models that indicate the trend will continue.

However, Kempthorne also created a "special rule" to prevent the Endangered Species Act from setting climate policy or limiting greenhouse gas emissions. The rule also declares that decisions on petroleum management off Alaska's coast would continue to be governed by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Environmental groups say exempting global warming and oil development from the list of threats facing polar bears is illegal and guts protections of the Endangered Species Act. They have sued to overturn the rule.

Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin sued to overturn the listing itself, claiming the Interior Department under Kempthorne did not respond to state concerns. State officials fear the listing could cripple offshore oil and gas development in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas.