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Endangered polar bears' future rests on thin ice

By **DAN JOLING**
The Associated Press

Polar bear policy in America can be summed up succinctly: The iconic bears are threatened with extinction, and so far nothing much is being done.

Two years after they were listed under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has taken no major action in response to their principal threat, the loss of sea ice habitat due to climate change.

Federal officials have declared that the Endangered Species Act will not be used in the attempt to regulate greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming and melting ice in the Arctic Ocean.

That leaves Rosa Meehan, the Fish and Wildlife Service marine mammals manager in Alaska, with few tools to protect the great bears of the Arctic. She hangs on to the hope that the scientists are wrong about the bears' future.

"Our crystal ball is not perfect," Meehan said recently.

She spoke between public hearings on whether the federal government should designate critical habitat for polar bears. Her agency has proposed designating 187,166 square miles of U.S. territory -- 95 percent of it in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas -- as polar bear critical habitat.

And that has drawn objections from the energy industry and other business interests. It would mean, for example,

that before granting permits for offshore drilling, federal agencies would have to review whether the action would adversely modify the habitat.

More than one person has asked Meehan whether designating critical habitat -- which, after all, would also be subject to warming -- wouldn't be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

"I'm one of the people who really hopes, you know, hopefully we didn't get this completely right," she said. "Maybe bears will be able to hang on. And if they are, then we want to make sure we give them as easy a chance as possible to hang on in a marginal environment. And so that means addressing all the other potential effects on bears."

Interior Department Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, under threat of lawsuits, reluctantly listed polar bears in May 2008. He said the alarming loss in recent decades of summer sea ice in the Arctic, and climate models indicating the trend will continue, forced the decision.

The announcement came eight months after summer sea ice levels melted to their lowest recorded level ever: 1.65 million square miles, or nearly 40 percent below average since satellite



A polar bear rests with her cubs in the Beaufort Sea. The biggest threat to the bears is melting ice, which wildlife officials can't stop. STEVE AMSTRUP / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via The Associated Press archive

monitoring began in 1979.

Along with the listing, Kempthorne created a "special rule" stating that the Endangered Species Act would not be used to set climate policy or limit greenhouse gas emissions.

The group that petitioned to list polar bears, the Center for Biological Diversity, calls the Kempthorne rule illegal and has sued to overturn it.

"The service itself has determined that loss of sea ice, which is a direct result of human-induced climate change, is the primary threat to polar bears' survival," said Alaska director Rebecca Noblin. "It defies logic to omit from consideration the single most important factor in listing the polar bear in the first place."

Alaskans on the other side of the issue are bewildered over why the agency is bothering to designate critical habitat for polar bears. The proposal covers an area larger than California.

Richard Glenn of Barrow, a geologist and vice president of Arctic Slope Regional Corp., told federal officials there's a breach in logic by creating regulatory hardships for Alaska companies while providing so little additional benefit for polar bears.

"If the creation of critical habitat is not going to result in any additional protection for the polar bear, then why create it?" he asked.

People in Barrow, he said, already feel the effects of living near endangered species.

"If you take that last bit of land remaining to our ownership, and then you bestow upon it multiple layers of critical habitat designation, then that's the ultimate bait and switch of a lifetime," he said.

Likewise, advocates for petroleum development off Alaska's northern coast said the agency erred by not accounting for inevitable costs to industry: consultations with federal agencies and litigation costs or delays from challenges to drilling permits.

The Resource Development Council, an Alaska business advocacy group, urged the service to exclude lease sale areas and communities from designated critical habitat.

"Environmental groups will likely target virtually every project within or adjacent to critical habitat, putting them and their associated benefits to local communities, the state and the nation at risk," said spokesman Carl Portman.

Meehan said she's playing the cards

she's dealt. The Fish and Wildlife Service, she said, will do all it can to ensure polar bear survival. The agency's models indicate that if summer sea ice disappears in the Arctic Ocean, a remnant of polar bears could survive in the Canadian Arctic. Maybe there will be a global addressing of greenhouse gases, Meehan said.

"We'll have a place for bears to come back to," she said.

The threatened bears, she said, are important to public understanding.

"They clearly underscore the impacts of changes, and it's something people can relate to. That's a really important conservation contribution that this whole situation gives."