

## ENDANGERED SPECIES: Polar bear habitat safeguards carry ‘relatively small’ price tag -- Interior

Allison Winter, E&E reporter

A proposal to protect vast areas of the Arctic for the polar bear would have a “relatively small” economic impact, according to an analysis released today by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The draft economic analysis concludes the proposed critical habitat for the polar bear would cost about \$669,000 over the next 29 years, or almost \$54,000 per year. The estimate includes forecast impacts to oil and gas exploration, development, production and construction.

The Obama administration has proposed designating more than 200,000 square miles in Alaska as “critical habitat” for the polar bear, the largest habitat proposal the government has ever put forward in a bid to protect an imperiled species.

The administration’s sweeping proposal includes barrier islands, terrestrial denning areas and sea ice. In total, the protected area is nearly a third the size of Alaska and larger than the states of Washington

and Oregon combined. Most of the habitat protections would go to offshore sea ice.

Once the habitat designation is made official, the government would be required to prevent “adverse modification” of the area and deny permits for activities that would interfere with the recovery of the species.

The new economic analysis -- required under the Endangered Species Act -- compares the price of protecting the habitat with a baseline of no critical habitat. Industrial Economics Inc. of Cambridge, Mass., prepared the report.

The group determined that since restrictions are already in place for the polar bears from ESA and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the main cost of critical habitat would be association with “adverse modification” of the habitat.

Interior agreed to protect the habitat under a partial settlement with environmental groups that had sued for expanded protections for the polar bear. The settlement, filed in federal court in California last year,

says Interior must designate critical habitat for the bear by June 30.

The agency is taking public comment on the economic analysis and the polar bear habitat for 60 days. The Interior Department plans to hold public hearings on the proposal in Alaska on June 15 in Anchorage and June 17 in Barrow.

The total costs for the polar bear habitat protections are in line with other estimates for much smaller habitat protections for other imperiled species. For instance, the agency said that protecting 1.8 million acres of critical habitat for the threatened California red-legged frog would cost as much as \$566 million over 20 years.

The agency could alter how it enforces the adverse modification requirement that is expected to be key in the habitat costs. The endangered species law prohibits the “destruction and adverse modification” of critical habitat. But multiple federal courts have said the agency needs to clarify the meaning of that phrase.