

SUMMIT COUNTY CITIZEN VOICE

Wildlife advocates want more polar bear protections New report says threats have increased since bears were listed in 2008



A United States Fish & Wildlife Service polar bear biologist labels blood samples taken from a bear being examined.

Photo Credit: Karen Rode/USFWS.

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by Bob Berwyn

By Summit Voice

FRISCO — While nobody thinks the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can slow or stop global warming, wildlife conservation advocates say the agency must do more to try and save polar bears from extinction.

The great Arctic predators have become a poster child for the impacts of global warming, but five years after they were put on the Endangered Species List, the USFWS has not developed a recovery plan.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the federal agency also should be considering new scientific evidence that threats to polar bears have increased, warranting a change from “threatened” to “endangered” status.

A new report from the CBD, On Thin Ice, suggests that polar bears face greater threats from melting sea ice and global warming now than they did in 2008, when they were first listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The report outlines well-known issues, including dwindling sea ice, which hit a record low last September, rising Arctic temperatures, which are increasing twice as fast as the global average and continued increases in CO2 emissions (up 13 percent since 2008).

As a result, the advocacy group has filed a formal notice of intent to sue under the Endangered Species Act, which says that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has not conducted a required five-year review of threats to polar bears.

“If the Obama administration doesn’t make a plan to save polar bears, in a few decades we’ll be writing their obituary,” said Kassie Siegel, director of the center’s Climate Law Institute. “As climate change burns away Arctic sea ice, these magnificent animals teeter on the brink of oblivion. Our government has to cut the greenhouse gas pollution that’s warming the Arctic and driving polar bears off the planet — and it has to act now.”

Since polar bears were listed, the Obama administration has endorsed and defended a Bush-era rule preventing the polar bears’ protected status from triggering additional measures to deal with global warming. Obama officials have also opened polar bear critical habitat to oil and gas development and failed

to use the Clean Air Act to regulate greenhouse gas pollution from power plants, ships, planes, offroad engines or coal mines.

The administration has taken one positive step for polar bears by pushing for increased protections for the species from the international rug trade through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

As the Center's report notes, polar bears depend on sea ice for hunting and other essential behaviors. Yet sea-ice melt has accelerated in recent years. In September 2012 Arctic sea ice reached a record low minimum extent — almost 300,000 square miles (an area about the size of Texas) smaller than the previous record low reached in 2007.

"The polar bears' situation is bleak, but it's not too late to save them," said Siegel. "And if we do what's needed to save polar bears, we'll also be doing what's needed to protect the rest of the world from the worst ravages of global warming."

Today's 60-day notice of intent to sue is required before a lawsuit can be filed to compel Fish and Wildlife to comply with the Endangered Species Act and better protect the polar bear.