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Group to sue to force polar bear recovery plan

By DAN JOLING, Associated Press
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — An environmental group has given formal notice it will go to court to force the federal government to complete a recovery plan for threatened polar bears.

The Center for Biological Diversity on Wednesday gave 60-day notice it also will sue to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complete a required five-year status review of the bears found along the northern coast of Alaska and other Arctic regions.

The Interior Department listed polar bears as threatened five years ago because of loss of their primary habitat, sea ice, due to climate warming. Federal scientists concluded that two-thirds of the world's polar bears would be extinct by 2050 under climate models forecasting future Arctic Ocean sea ice.

Those models have been found to be too conservative, said Kassie Siegel, the Center for Biological Diversity attorney who wrote the original petition that led to the listing.

The five-year status review is required by law, she said. There's no legal deadline for

the recovery plan, she said, but the agency routinely completes them in a couple of years and waiting five years is unreasonable.

"We can solve this problem, but time is running out," Siegel said by phone from Sacramento, Calif.

Cathy Rezabeck, an Alaska spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the agency had not reviewed the notice and could not immediately respond.

In announcing the listing, then-Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said endangered species law would not be used to set climate policy or limit greenhouse gas emissions, a rule affirmed by the Obama administration.

A status review, Siegel said, could bump polar bears up from "threatened" status to "endangered" status, allowing the federal government to consider the effect of greenhouse gases on sea ice. A recovery plan could specify the greenhouse gas reductions necessary to save sea ice and polar bears, she said.

Taking steps to curb warming and save polar bears would mean a safer and healthier world for humans, she said.