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NEWS

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Polar Bear Range States Conclude Meeting in Moscow, Russia

The meeting of the polar bear range states – the United States, Canada, Greenland, Norway, and the Russian Federation – under the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears concluded today. The two-day meeting in Moscow, Russia, brought together polar bear scientists, wildlife managers, technical experts, and representatives of native peoples of the Arctic, including Alaska Natives, to discuss current and future challenges faced by the polar bear.

“The future of polar bears is uncertain, and it’s imperative that the polar bear range states take aggressive action and work together to address the threats they face,” said Geoff Haskett, Service Regional Director and head of the United States Delegation. “We made progress at this meeting, identifying information gaps and areas where we could collaborate more effectively to protect and sustain polar bear populations. I am encouraged by the shared recognition of the need for engagement of indigenous peoples and cooperation of the global community to ensure the long-term survival of polar bears.”

While significant declines have not yet been observed in most populations, declining sea ice caused by human-induced global climate change is projected to have a significant impact on most polar bear populations. Habitat loss restricts the access of polar bears to seals, their main prey items. Sea-ice has been reduced by 8 percent in the past 30 years alone, while summer sea-ice has been reduced by 15 to 20 percent. The best available scientific information indicates that polar bear populations will suffer significant declines over the next 45 years, with many populations facing extirpation.

The meeting focused on identifying information needs to enable effective management of polar bears throughout their range. In addition, trade and trade enforcement issues as well as the need to cooperate in combating polar bear poaching were discussed and a working group will be established to provide recommendations to the range states. Attendees highlighted the importance of cooperation with other international organizations, such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s Polar Bear Specialist Group and the Arctic Council. Finally, all of the range states committed to implementation of national action plans for polar bear conservation and completion of Volume 1 of the Circumpolar Action Plan for Polar Bears by the next range states meeting which will be held in Greenland in 2015.

In the United States, the polar bear has been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 2008 and protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act since 1972. The primary conservation threat is the loss (decrease in area) of sea ice due to global warming, as well as a decrease in the quality of sea ice as it melts and refreezes.

For more information on the polar bear and polar bear conservation, visit:
<http://www.fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/pbmain.htm>.

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