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NEWS

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New Equipment Makes Treatment of Oiled, Injured, or Sick Polar Bear on the North Slope Possible

Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the achievement of a milestone to address challenges associated with responding to oiled, injured, or sick polar bears in the wild. In April, a brand new polar bear holding module and two smaller transport cages arrived in Anchorage and will soon be shipped to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. Alaska Clean Seas, the primary oil spill response organization on the North Slope, has donated permanent storage space for the polar bear response equipment.

“Today’s announcement is the result of a collaborative effort between the Service, Alaska Zoo, Alaska Clean Seas, and Defenders of Wildlife. We greatly appreciate our partners meaningful contributions to polar bear conservation,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Director Geoffrey Haskett.

“Alaska Clean Seas is pleased to be a partner on this cooperative effort, which will continue to improve the spill response capabilities for wildlife,” said Alaska Clean Seas Planning and Development Manager Lee Majors.

“We are proud to be part of such an innovative and collaborative effort on behalf of polar bear conservation,” said Alaska Zoo Executive Director Patrick Lampi.

The custom-built polar bear holding module, currently at the Alaska Zoo, is a twelve foot square cage made of stainless steel and designed to hold a small family group of bears. The enclosure was built for the Service by Carter 2 Systems, Inc. of Portland, Oregon, a company that specializes in making various safe, durable holding and transport enclosures for zoos throughout the nation. The specialized polar bear module includes unique design features such as the ability to collapse, accordion-style, down to less than 2 feet in width. “There were several things that challenged us in designing the module and transport cages” Jerry Carter observed. “First, they had to be designed to hold an adult male polar bear as well as smaller females with cubs. As you can imagine, we had to err on the side of caution at every detail to ensure that the design was strong enough to accommodate an ‘agitated adult male bear’ scenario while also keeping the animals and caretakers completely safe when using the equipment. Second, all the equipment had to fit inside a 20’ shipping container and be easily set up by 2–3 people. Ultimately, we couldn’t be happier with the finished product. We’re excited and confident of how this equipment will impact the care and rehabilitation of our wildlife. It was an incredible

opportunity to partner with such great people that care about our wildlife and to showcase our custom design capabilities.”

The module also has docking ports that allow two smaller, lighter aluminum transport cages to be attached. These cages were designed and built to transport oiled or sick polar bears from a remote field site back to the main holding area for treatment. The transport cages, 20-foot storage container, and two custom-built, portable polar bear washing tables were generously paid for by Defenders of Wildlife, a non-profit wildlife conservation organization that shares the Service’s mission of reducing human-polar bear conflicts in Alaska.

“Defenders works with the Service’s polar bear staff and other organizations and agencies to implement practical, on-the-ground wildlife conservation solutions. Ensuring we have the tools to care for polar bears and other arctic marine mammals in the event of an oil spill just makes sense,” according to Karla Dutton, Alaska Program Director for Defenders of Wildlife.

This equipment will now make it possible for the Service to transport, treat and hold polar bears within their home range if an oil spill occurs—without having to transport them off the Slope to Anchorage or elsewhere for treatment.

“Reducing the amount of time that is needed to treat polar bears will help reduce stress associated with long transport and sedation times, as well avoid the risk of exposure of bears to diseases that might occur outside their home range, thereby making their release back into the wild more likely,” said Susanne Miller, a polar bear biologist leading this effort for the Service. “Now, if we suddenly get an oiled family group or a couple of individual adult bears that, for whatever reason, need temporary holding or medical treatment, not only do we have the equipment, we also have a dedicated group of partners that are willing to help us with that mission.”

Orphan cubs-of-the-year, like Kali and Qannik that were rescued in 2013 and 2011 respectively, cannot survive without their mothers in the wild and will need to be cared for at the Alaska Zoo until permanent placement can be arranged by the Service. The Alaska Zoo has worked with the Service for many years on polar bear conservation, providing animal handling and veterinarian care for orphaned cubs, supporting education and research efforts, and providing invaluable technical guidance and logistical support during oil spill response planning efforts.

Photos of the holding module and cages available on Flickr:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/usfws_alaska/sets/72157625356108732/

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information, visit www.fws.gov/alaska/, or connect with us through any of these social media at <http://www.fws.gov/home/socialmedia/index.html>.

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