



# NEWS

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## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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### **Interior Secretary Kempthorne Announces Proposal to List Polar Bears as Threatened Under Endangered Species Act**

(BOISE, Idaho) – Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne today announced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act and initiating a comprehensive scientific review to assess the current status and future of the species.

The Service will use the next 12 months to gather more information, undertake additional analyses, and assess the reliability of relevant scientific models before making a final decision whether to list the species.

“Polar bears are one of nature’s ultimate survivors, able to live and thrive in one of the world’s harshest environments,” Kempthorne said. “But we are concerned the polar bears’ habitat may literally be melting.”

“Based on current analysis, there are concerns about the effect of receding sea ice on polar bear populations,” he said. “I am directing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey to aggressively work with the public and the scientific community over the next year to broaden our understanding of what is happening with the species. This information will be vital to the ultimate decision on whether the species should be listed.”

Polar bears are already protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Under that law, it is generally prohibited to (1) take or (2) import marine mammals and their parts or products.

The species is also protected by international treaties involving countries in the bear’s range. In early December, Congress passed the United States-Russia Polar Bear Conservation and Management Act of 2006, implementing a treaty with Russia designed to conserve polar bears shared between the two countries. President Bush is expected to sign this legislation into law.

Today’s proposal cites the threat to polar bear populations caused by receding sea ice, which bears use as a platform to hunt for prey. In recommending a proposed listing, the Fish and Wildlife Service used scientific models that predict the impact of the loss of ice on bear populations over the next few decades.

Scientific observations have revealed a decline in late summer Arctic sea ice to the extent of 7.7 percent per decade and in the perennial sea ice area of 9.8 percent per decade since 1978. Observations have likewise shown a thinning of the Arctic sea ice of 32 percent from the 1960s and 1970s to the 1990s in some local areas.

There are 19 polar bear populations in the circumpolar Arctic, containing an estimated total of 20,000-25,000 bears.

The western Hudson Bay population of polar bears in Canada has suffered a 22 percent decline. Alaska populations have not experienced a statistically significant decline, but Fish and Wildlife Service biologists are concerned that they may face such a decline in the future.

Recent scientific studies of adult polar bears in Canada and in Alaska's Southern Beaufort Sea have shown weight loss and reduced cub survival. While data are lacking about many populations, the Service suspects that polar bears elsewhere are being similarly affected by the reduction of sea ice

"We have sufficient scientific evidence of a threat to the species to warrant proposing it for listing, but we still have a lot of work to do to enhance our scientific models and analyses before making a final decision," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall.

The Service extensively analyzed the impact of both onshore and offshore oil and gas development on polar bears and determined they do not pose a threat to the species.

The Service likewise examined the impact of subsistence harvest of polar bears by Alaska Natives. Such harvest is specifically allowed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and would also be allowed if the polar bear is listed under the Endangered Species Act, unless the Service finds that the harvest is materially and negatively affecting the polar bear.

Harvesting polar bears is of great social, cultural and economic importance to Native peoples throughout much of the Arctic and maintaining a harvest within sustainable limits is one of the department's priorities, Kempthorne noted.

While the proposal to list the species as threatened cites the threat of receding sea ice, it does not include a scientific analysis of the causes of climate change. That analysis is beyond the scope of the Endangered Species Act review process, which focuses on information about the polar bear and its habitat conditions, including reduced sea ice.

However, climate change science and issues of causation are discussed in other analyses undertaken by the Bush Administration. The administration treats climate change very seriously and recognizes the role of greenhouse gases in climate change.

The Service invites the public to submit data, information, and comments on the proposed rule. Comments will be accepted on the proposed rule for the next 90 days.

A copy of the proposed rule and other information about the proposal is available on the Service's Marine Mammal website located at:  
<http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/issues.htm>.

"Our goal ultimately is to combine the best science available with the power of working hand-in-hand with states, tribes, foreign countries, industry, and other partners to minimize the threats to polar bears and conserve this great icon of the Arctic for future generations," Kempthorne said.