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Agency Proposes to List Polar Bears as Threatened

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The Interior Department proposed Wednesday to designate polar bears as a threatened species, saying that the accelerating loss of the Arctic ice that is the bears' hunting platform has led biologists to believe that bear populations will decline, perhaps sharply, in the coming decades.

Many experts on the Arctic say that global warming is causing the ice to melt and that the warming is at least partly the result of the atmospheric buildup of heat-trapping gases from tailpipes and smokestacks. The plight of the polar bear has been held up by environmentalists as a symbol of global warming caused by humans.

But in a conference call with reporters, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said that although his decision to seek protection for polar bears acknowledged the melting of the Arctic ice, his department was not taking a position on why the ice was melting or what to do about it.

While the Bush administration "takes climate change very seriously and recognizes the role of greenhouse gases in climate change," Mr. Kempthorne said, it was not his department's job to assess causes or prescribe solutions. "That whole aspect of climate change is beyond the scope of the Endangered Species Act," he added.

The scientific analysis in the proposal itself, however, did assess the cause of melting ice. Most of the studies on the Arctic climate and ice trends cited to support the proposed listing assumed that the buildup of heat-trapping gases was probably contributing to the loss of sea ice, or that the continued buildup of these gases, left unchecked, could create ice-free Arctic summers later this century, and possibly in as little as three decades.

The Interior Department has a year to gather and study comments on the proposed listing and make a final determination. It must also work out a recovery plan to control and reduce harmful impacts to the species, usually by controlling the activities that cause harm.

It is unclear whether such a recovery plan could avoid addressing the link between manmade emissions of heat-trapping gases and the increase in Arctic temperatures.

Kert Davies, the research director for Greenpeace U.S.A., one of three environmental groups that sued the Interior Department in 2005 to force it to add polar bears to the list of threatened species, said the administration was "clearly scrambling for credibility of any kind in this issue."

Kassie Siegel, the lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity, a group based in Arizona that took the lead in the lawsuit calling on the department to list the polar bear, added, "I don't see how even this administration can write this proposal without acknowledging that the primary threat to polar bears is global warming and without acknowledging the science of global warming."

As a result of the lawsuit, the Interior Department had a court-ordered deadline of Wednesday to make a decision.

The worldwide population of polar bears currently stands at 20,000 to 25,000, broken into 19 groups in Russia, Denmark, Norway, Canada and the United States. One-quarter to one-fifth of that population occupies waters off the shores of Alaska or the nearby coastlines, with separate groups in the Chukchi Sea off northwestern Alaska, the Northern Beaufort Sea and the Southern Beaufort Sea off the North Slope of Alaska

The most-studied bear population, in the Western Hudson Bay in Canada, dropped 22 percent, to 935 from 1,194 from 1987 to 2004, the proposal by the Fish and Wildlife Service said.

It added, "However, based on environmental factors and observed patterns of population trends for some populations, it is likely that most populations will exhibit declines in the future."

The International Conservation Union, in its latest red list of endangered wildlife, gave polar bears threatened status in May, projecting a decline of 30 percent by midcentury from current populations, mainly due to projected losses of sea ice in a warming world.

Polar bears are dependent on sea ice as a platform for hunting seals, and as a pathway to coastal areas. The ice shrinkage has meant that polar bears, which are strong swimmers, have had to cover longer distances between ice and land.

They have survived previous Arctic warming periods, including the last warm stretch between ice ages some 130,000 years ago, but some climate experts project that nothing in the species' history is likely to match the pace and extent of warming and ice retreats projected in this century and beyond, should emissions of heat-trapping gases continue unabated.

While Mr. Kempthorne and Dale Hall, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said Wednesday that they saw no separate risk to polar bears from oil and gas activity, the latest assessment of the species for the International Conservation Union, by a group of experts including Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, did include such activity in a list of threats, including toxic contaminants, shipping and recreational viewing.

Recently, the Minerals Management Service, another division of the Interior Department, proposed opening sections of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas to oil and gas drilling.

"This listing will hopefully provide additional leverage to look more closely at those decisions," said Margaret Williams, director of the Bering Sea ecoregion program at the World Wildlife Federation.

Scott Schliebe, a federal biologist and the polar bear project leader for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the basic connection between shrinking ice and greater distress for the bears was well established. This is shown clearly in areas where ice has retreated progressively in summers -- including the Beaufort Sea off the North Slope and Hudson Bay in Canada. In such places, Mr. Schliebe said, "we know today that they're facing a situation of distress and nutritional stress."

The department's proposal said that "at this time" the lands and waters most critical to the bears' protection, called critical habitat in the law, were "not determinable."

Critical-habitat designations ensure that federal agencies must study the impact that any activities they conduct or approve in that area might have on the species at risk.