

Bush administration proposes to list polar bears as threatened

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Secretary of the Interior Dick Kempthorne cited climate change as a key reason for the threat to polar bears. The statement prompted environmentalists to see in the move a possibly major departure from the Bush administration's past inattention to the global warming threat. "Polar bears are one of nature's ultimate survivors, able to live and thrive in one of the world's harshest environments," said Kempthorne. "But we are concerned the polar bears' habitat may literally be melting." Courtesy Dave Olsen, USFWS environmentalists hoped that recognition of the threat would mean the U.S. government would begin to force polluters to limit emissions of greenhouse gases, which scientists see as largely responsible for the climate change. Industrial activities and automobiles are key sources of the gases. The proposal is a victory for the polar bear, and all wildlife threatened by global warming," said Kassie Siegel, a lawyer for the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity. A study published this month suggested Arctic summers could be nearly ice-free by 2040, a disaster for polar bears and other species that live on the ice. The Fish and Wildlife Service will use the next year to gather more information before deciding whether to list the species, Kempthorne 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," Kempthorne said. The proposal cites the threat to polar bear populations caused by retreating sea ice, which bears use as a platform to hunt for prey. Studies 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, Kempthorne said. 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 Arctic, containing an estimated total of 20,000-25,000 bears. "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 administration treats climate change very seriously and recognizes the role of greenhouse gases in climate change," the Interior Department said in its statement announcing the proposal Wednesday.

Source: <http://www.world-science.net>

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