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Alaska governor questions science of polar bear listing

The Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP)-- Officially, the state of Alaska has not decided whether to back a federal proposal to list polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

But speaking at a federal hearing, Gov. Sarah Palin's point person on polar bears stopped just short of saying it was a lousy idea.

Tina Cunnings, a biologist and a special assistant to the commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game, questioned whether polar bears really need sea ice to survive. She said polar bears are adaptable to use land for hunting, and though their preferred food, ice seals, may be declining, bears are adapting to alternative food sources.

She also testified that a listing in the United States ultimately could harm bears in Canada because Inuit villagers would no longer have an incentive to preserve them for American hunters. An ESA listing would ban importation of polar bear trophy hides.

"We are concerned that a listing of polar bears under ESA in the United States may actually be harmful for the conservation of polar bear populations internationally," she said.

In a state dependent on the petroleum industry for most of its revenue, and actively trying to spark another economic boom in the form of a natural gas pipeline to the Lower 48 states, the fear of restrictions on development from the Endangered Species Act may outweigh the desire to add more protections for America's polar bears on a warming planet.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been vague about what a recovery plan might entail if polar bears are listed as threatened. But the law requires federal agencies to evaluate their regulatory actions with respect to any threatened species if habitat, in this case, sea ice, is designated as critical.

Supporters of the listing want the federal government to declare global warming as the direct cause of harm to polar bear habitat, sea ice, and consider limits on utilities and industry producing greenhouse gasses, not only in Alaska but throughout the country.

Cunnings said Friday her department has the same goals as federal authorities -- doing what's best for the wildlife.

She said the state is in the preliminary stage of reviewing the science that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service used to make its initial determination, and that she based her testimony on the services' own petition posted Jan. 9 in the Federal Register.

But the idea that polar bears can adapt to living on land or can thrive on a diet of

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something other than seals flies in the face of most of the report as well as the opinion of most polar bear researchers.

Andrew Derocher, a University of Alberta polar bear researcher quoted extensively in the report and chairman of the Polar Bear Specialist Group for the World Conservation Union, called it "absolutely fanciful."

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"There's not a credible polar bear biologist in the world who would make that statement," he said Friday.

Cunning's testimony followed the lead of Palin. Two weeks after taking office in December, Alaska's new governor voiced concern for the state's economic health in a letter to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne.

"Listing polar bears under the Endangered Species Act has the potential to damage Alaska's and the nation's economy without any benefit to polar bear numbers or their habitat," Palin wrote.

The driving force in the concern over polar bears, she said, is the decline in sea ice. Listing bears as threatened, she said, would not cause sea water to freeze.

"When a species' habitat, in this case, sea ice, is declining due to climate change, but there are no discrete human activities that can be regulated or modified to effect change, what do you do?" she wrote.

She urged the formation of a team of scientists to prepare a conservation plan for polar bears rather than listing, which could result in "unintended effects."

"It is highly probable that among them will be third-party law suits from litigants with a variety of motivations, to list large portions of Alaska's North Slope as critical habitat or to limit the emission of greenhouse gases throughout the United States," she warned.

Critics of an ESA listing say polar bears already are closely managed under international agreements. The Fish and Wildlife Service agreed, with one exception: There is no effective regulatory mechanism in place to address the recession of sea ice, the service concluded in its proposed listing.

Polar bears are classified as marine mammals because of their close relationship with sea ice. They use sea ice to hunt their main prey, ringed seals, the only ice seals that maintain breathing holes in thick Arctic Ocean ice. Polar bears capture other kinds of ice seals at the edges of leads, or cracks, in sea ice.

In her testimony, Cunning questioned whether federal experts were correctly interpreting scientific data, such as climate projection models. They disagree, she said, over when the Arctic Ocean could be virtually ice free in summers. Some say 40 years, some say 100 years, she said.

The proposed listing is based on the presumption that sea ice will be significantly diminished and that sea ice is the most important factor for their survival. Without citing which population of bears, she said polar bears are adapting to living on land.

"Preferred food sources such as some ice seal populations may be declining, but data indicate that the bears are adapting to use alternative food sources, including food sources that may be expanding," she said.

Derocher said people who have an economic interest in keeping polar bears off the threatened species list may be wishfully thinking that polar bears can thrive on land. That niche is filled, he said.

"We already have a terrestrial bear in the Arctic and it's called the grizzly bear," he said.

If confined to land, polar bears might eat plants, human garbage, or whale carcasses left behind by hunters.

"As far as we're concerned, most of those food sources are not enough to maintain a viable population in the long term," Derocher said.

Even if more southerly seals, such as harbor seals, expand their territories north as warming continues, polar bears still need an ice platform to hunt them, he said.

"We see very little indication that they would have broad-base flexibility to leave their seal diet all together," he said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has two more public hearing scheduled tomorrow in Washington, D.C., and Wednesday in Barrow, Alaska. The agency is collecting public testimony until April 9. Its decision on listing polar bears is due next January.

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