

News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Polar Bear Critical Habitat

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced a proposal to designate critical habitat for the polar bear, and will open a 60-day public comment period on the measure. The critical habitat proposal identifies habitat in three separate areas or units: barrier island habitat, sea ice habitat and terrestrial denning habitat.

“This Administration is fully committed to the protection and recovery of the polar bear,” said Interior Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Tom Strickland. “Proposing critical habitat for this iconic species is one step in the right direction to help this species stave off extinction, recognizing that the greatest threat to the polar bear is the melting of Arctic sea ice caused by climate change. As we move forward with a comprehensive energy and climate strategy, we will continue to work to protect the polar bear and its fragile environment.”

The total area proposed for designation would cover approximately 200,541 square miles and is found entirely within the lands and waters of the United States. Barrier island habitat includes coastal barrier islands and spits along Alaska’s coast, and is used for denning, refuge from human disturbances, access to maternal dens and feeding habitat, as well as travel along the coast. Sea ice habitat is located over the continental shelf, and includes water 300m and less in depth. Terrestrial denning habitat includes lands within 32 km (about 20 miles) of the northern coast of Alaska between the Canadian border and the Kavik River and within 8 km (about 5 miles) between the Kavik River and Barrow.

Polar bears evolved for life in the harsh arctic environment, and are distributed throughout most ice-covered seas of the Northern Hemisphere. They are generally limited to areas where the sea is ice-covered for much of the year; however, they are not evenly distributed throughout their range. They are most abundant near the shore in shallow-water areas, and in other places where currents and ocean upwelling increases marine productivity and maintains some open water during the ice-covered season.

Polar bears are completely dependent upon Arctic sea-ice habitat for survival. They use sea ice as a platform to hunt and feed upon seals, as a habitat on which to seek mates and breed, as a

platform to move to onshore maternity denning areas, and make long-distance movements, and occasionally for maternity denning. Most populations use onshore habitat partially or exclusively for maternity denning.

Throughout most of their range, polar bears remain on the sea ice year-round or spend only short periods on land. There are two polar bear populations that occur in the U.S.; the Chukchi Sea population and the Southern Beaufort Sea population. Internationally, they also occur throughout the East Siberian, Laptev, and Kara Seas of Russia; Fram Strait and Greenland Sea; Barents Sea of northern Europe; Baffin Bay, which separates Canada and Greenland; through most of the Canadian Arctic archipelago; and in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas located to the west and north of Alaska.

The polar bear was listed as threatened, range-wide, under the ESA on May 14, 2008, due to loss of sea ice habitat caused by climate change. Other threats evaluated at that time included impacts from activities such as oil and gas operations, subsistence harvest, shipping and tourism. No other impacts were considered as significant in the decline but minimizing effects from these activities could become increasingly important for polar bears as their numbers decline.

The ESA requires that, to the maximum extent possible, the Secretary of the Interior designate critical habitat at the time the species is listed. However, the Service determined additional time was needed to conduct a thorough evaluation and peer review of a potential critical habitat designation and thus did not publish a proposed designation concurrent with the final listing rule. As part of the settlement of a subsequent lawsuit brought by a group of conservation organizations, the Department of the Interior agreed to publish a final rule designating critical habitat for the polar bear no later than June 30, 2010. Today's announcement is a step toward fulfilling the terms of that agreement.

Critical habitat identifies geographic areas containing features considered essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management or protection. The designation of critical habitat under the ESA does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands. A critical habitat designation does not affect private lands unless federal funds, permits, or activities are involved.

The areas of proposed critical habitat do encompass areas where oil and gas exploration activities are known to occur. Section 7 of the ESA requires federal agencies to ensure that the activities they authorize, fund or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the species or to destroy or adversely modify its critical habitat. If a federal action may affect the polar bear or its critical habitat, the permitting or action agency must enter into consultation with the Service. This applies to oil and gas development activities, as well as any other activity within the range of the polar bear that may have an adverse effect on the species.

For more information about this critical habitat proposal and other issues on polar bear conservation, please visit <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/criticalhabitat.htm> or www.fws.gov.

Comments on the critical habitat proposal will be accepted for 60 days following its publication in the Federal Register. You may submit comments by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> (follow the instructions for submitting comments).
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery to Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R7-ES-2009-2042; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. These methods will be available upon publication of the rule in the Federal Register. We will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit **www.fws.gov**.

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