

**ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE; CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY; DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE; EARTHJUSTICE; NORTHERN ALASKA ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER; NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL; PACIFIC ENVIRONMENT; REDOIL; SIERRA CLUB; THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY; WORLD WILDLIFE FUND**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
January 16, 2008**

**Conservation Community Praises Chairman Markey for Highlighting Conflicting Department of Interior (DOI) Decisions that Threaten America's Polar Bears;**

*Arctic Oil and Gas Lease Sales Must Be Postponed Until They Comply with the Endangered Species Act*

*The House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming hearing on Thursday, January 17, titled, "On Thin Ice: the Future of the Polar Bear" will highlight the inextricable link between the survival of the polar bear and protection of the bear and its habitat from the impacts of oil and gas activities in America's Arctic.*

Conservation groups today applauded Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), Chairman of the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, for holding a hearing to highlight the connections of potential oil and gas leasing in the Chukchi Sea to polar bear survival in America's Arctic. On January 2, one DOI agency, the Minerals Management Service (MMS), announced its intention to open up 29.7 million acres of the Chukchi Sea to oil and gas leasing in key polar bear habitat, with the bidding on Lease Sale 193 to take place on February 6 in Anchorage, Alaska. Less than one week after this announcement, a different DOI agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), announced it would miss a legally required January 9 deadline for making its final decision on whether to list polar bears as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as a result of the drastic impacts of global warming on the bear's habitat in the Chukchi Sea and across America's Arctic. The heads of both of these agencies were scheduled to testify at today's hearing.

In a January 7 announcement on the listing postponement, FWS anticipated a final polar bear decision within a month. If the February 6 lease sale were to move forward as planned, this timing could result in a polar bear listing just one day after nearly 30 million acres of key polar bear habitat in the Chukchi Sea is sold off to the oil and gas industry. FWS would then lose the opportunity to apply ESA protections for polar bear habitat before that habitat is leased to oil companies.

"There are so many unanswered questions surrounding the likely impacts of this lease sale, not the least of which is whether and how the polar bear could be protected from oil and gas activities," said David Dickson, Western Arctic Wilderness and Oceans Program Director for Alaska Wilderness League. "The timing of this sale is just wrong, but a remedy is easy. Secretary Kempthorne can simply hold off on this massive lease sale until the listing and critical habitat decisions are made and all necessary information is collected and assessed."

U.S. Senators, Representatives, Alaskan Natives, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Army Corps of Engineers and the public have already called into question

MMS' plans to move forward with the sale, despite serious gaps in necessary information. "Not only is there little known about the Chukchi Sea polar bear population and its habitat, but MMS' final plan is full of admissions about how little information is available regarding nearly all wildlife in the Chukchi Sea, including walrus, seals, bowhead and other whales, and migratory birds," said Eleanor Huffines, Alaska Regional Director for The Wilderness Society. "We are far beyond accepting DOI promises that they will take care of these problems after the lease sale is held."

"REDOIL (Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands) supports the subsistence rights of Inupiat communities. We strongly feel that the communities that rely on the Chukchi Sea for their subsistence livelihood have been overlooked in the Lease Sale 193 decision," said Faith Gemmill, Campaign Organizer of REDOIL, a grassroots Alaska Native organization. "These communities have consistently expressed their opposition to any oil and gas leasing of the Chukchi Sea in federal government to government (MMS) meetings with Inupiat Tribal governments, yet MMS has gone forward with this decision and disregarded the concerns of the people who will bear the brunt of this unsound and unjust decision," stated Gemmill. "We ask that this decision be revoked and the sale be reconsidered to reflect the voices of Inupiat communities and their concerns for the habitat of the polar bear and walrus which the Inupiat have noted, by traditional ecological knowledge, are affected by global warming impacts."

"Secretary Kempthorne should heed requests to stop the lease sale," said Pamela Miller, Arctic Coordinator for Northern Alaska Environmental Center. "It is simply outrageous that he would risk the polar bear, other Arctic wildlife, and local communities by giving the oil company leases under these circumstances." As numerous experts have stated, the DOI is missing key baseline information on the impacts of global warming and the likely impacts on it of oil and gas development to the Chukchi Sea – including a high potential for oil spills. MMS has admitted a 33% to 51% chance of a "large" oil spill entering offshore as a result of their leasing plan.

"The DOI is charged not just with managing oil drilling, but with protecting America's wildlife. At a time when Arctic sea ice is melting at an alarming rate, the DOI should make safeguarding the polar bear a top priority," said Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope. "It makes no sense to open prime polar bear habitat to drilling when the animal is under consideration for federal protection. It's like locking your doors and leaving all the windows open."

Today's hearing is expected to shine a spotlight on what is known and unknown about the effects oil and gas development in the pristine Arctic Ocean would have on the survival of imperiled polar bear populations – as well as other species – already suffering as a result of rapid sea ice melt. "It's critical that we protect the polar bear and what is left of its natural habitat, and keep it free from the devastating and irreversible impacts of oil and gas drilling," said Charles Clusen, Director, Alaska Projects for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "We have the tools to invest in smart, clean, renewable energy sources that will not only reduce our global warming emissions, but free us from the addiction to dirty fuels."

"The Chukchi Sea must be protected as critical habitat for the polar bear, not auctioned off to the highest oil-company bidder," said Kassie Siegel, Climate Program Director of the Center for Biological Diversity, and one of the witnesses for today's hearing.

"The plight of the polar bear is a warning that we absolutely cannot continue with business as usual," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, Executive Vice President of Defenders of Wildlife, former Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and another witness for today's hearing. "This administration must move now

to adopt an energy policy that will reduce the impacts of global warming. If we act now, there is hope for polar bears, the Arctic ecosystem – and ourselves.”

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\* For more information on this hearing and access materials, maps, photos on this issue, go to [media.alaskacoalition.org](http://media.alaskacoalition.org).

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