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DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE * ENDANGERED SPECIES COALITION * SIERRA
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**More than 200,000 Citizens Ask Secretary Salazar for
Real Protections for Polar Bear's Arctic Home**
Public overwhelmingly calls for halt to proposed oil drilling in Arctic Ocean

WASHINGTON, DC – More than 200,000 people sent Interior Secretary Ken Salazar a holiday gift of thanks today for proposing critical habitat for the polar bear throughout much of America's Arctic. However, these same concerned citizens also asked Secretary Salazar not to make things worse for the beleaguered species – listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in May 2008 – by allowing risky and aggressive oil and gas development to move forward in the lands and waters that polar bears, scores of other Arctic wildlife and Arctic indigenous communities depend on to survive. The threats posed by oil and gas development to the polar bear and its Arctic environment have been underscored in recent weeks by reports of three large oil spills in the Arctic's Prudhoe Bay, and a frightening revisit to the past with a major spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound.

In late October, the sea ice of the Arctic's Chukchi and Beaufort Seas, the majority of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain, and extensive barrier islands were all proposed as critical habitat for the polar bear. That same week, Secretary Salazar also gave Shell Oil the green light to start drilling in the Beaufort Sea as early as this summer, despite a glaring lack of information on the impacts of such development on the polar bear and other species. In addition, a similar proposal in the Chukchi Sea was conditionally approved earlier this month - even though the government has not yet resolved legal problems with the Bush-era five year leasing plan.

The Arctic is the "least studied and most poorly understood place on earth," according to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. Thus the full range of impacts from development is unknown. Oil spills are a grave threat in this icy environment, government scientists have predicted a 40 percent chance of one or more large oil spills in the Chukchi Sea alone. There is currently no technology and limited capacity to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic.

There must be a timeout on all leasing and drilling in the Arctic until a comprehensive plan based on sound science and traditional knowledge is developed to determine if, where, when, and how such activities should occur. Additionally, the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, identified as critical on-land denning habitat for the polar bear, should be given stronger protections.

Statements from conservation groups:

“Let’s begin the next decade by acknowledging that oil drilling means oil spilling in Alaska’s Arctic – and by committing to protect the Arctic both onshore and off for all of us who depend on this fragile ecosystem for the future health of our planet,” said Cindy Shogan, executive director of **Alaska Wilderness League**.

“Americans have spoken loud and clear in support of protecting the polar bear and its unique and fragile Arctic habitat,” said Rebecca Noblin in the Anchorage office of the **Center for Biological Diversity**. “If Secretary Salazar is serious about saving polar bears and other Arctic wildlife, he must truly protect their sea-ice habitat by rejecting harmful Bush-era drilling plans.”

“The Interior Department made the right call in protecting most of the places that the polar bear needs to survive. But giving Shell the go ahead to fire up its drills in Beaufort and Chukchi seas doesn’t make sense,” said Karla Dutton, the Alaska program director for **Defenders of Wildlife**. “Big oil’s bottom-line isn’t endangered here. It’s the polar bear that needs real protection.”

“Today’s deadline, which falls on the 36th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, reminds us that foresight and bold action is needed to protect endangered wildlife. This is as true as ever for species such as the polar bear,” said Leda Huta, executive director of the **Endangered Species Coalition**.

“Secretary Salazar’s decision to designate polar bear critical habitat is very encouraging, and to make it meaningful it needs to be finalized and followed by sound management decisions. If aggressive oil and gas development continues to move forward in America’s Arctic, polar bears and scores of other Arctic wildlife will be at risk,” said Nicole Whittington-Evans, acting regional director of **The Wilderness Society** Alaska office. “Instead, we need a time-out on all new Arctic oil exploration and development until we have a far better understanding of the missing science and risks, particularly in the face of climate change.”

“We urge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complete the designation of critical habitat for the polar bear. There is no question that polar bears are in trouble. Studies have documented plunging survival rates for polar bear cubs and diminishing body weights for adults as a result of melting sea ice. Scientists warn that without protection, polar bears could disappear by 2050. We need to do everything possible to help polar bears survive, including eliminating the threat of offshore drilling and protecting the most critical onshore denning habitat -- the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. There is no environmentally sound way to drill for oil in polar bear habitat,” said Dan Ritzman, Alaska Program Director for the **Sierra Club**. “We don’t need to sacrifice the chance for future generations to experience polar bears and other wildlife just so oil companies can break their billion-dollar profit records.”