

Biden admin will review status of threatened polar bear

By Heather Richards

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The Biden administration said today that it will review how the threatened polar bear is surviving in the U.S. Arctic under its current Endangered Species Act protections.

The assessment by the Fish and Wildlife Service, required every five years under the ESA, will undergird larger management decisions for the species. Those in turn determine federal actions that could affect the bears' population, such as oil and gas development in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska or the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

FWS listed the polar bear as threatened in 2008. It's seeking scientific and commercial input on what should be included in the review and giving a 60-day window for those comments, according to a [notice](#) published today in the *Federal Register*.

The review will incorporate new information such as the bear's relative abundance, the health of its habitat and conservation measures that have been put in place since the last review.

Wildlife officials finalized the last review in 2017 during the Trump administration. Earlier this year, they also updated the official estimate of the Arctic bear's population size, basing those numbers on a 2015 study ([Greenwire](#), June 28.). According to FWS, the southern Beaufort Sea subpopulation that dens in the Arctic refuge could number as few as 780 bears.

Polar bears face increasing vulnerability due to a warming climate, according to wildlife experts. The Arctic is warming as much as three times faster than the rest of the globe, shortening the critical amount of time each year when the ocean is covered with ice.

Environmental groups were supportive of the move to review the bear's current status and underscored the impact that activities like oil and gas production, as well as climate change, may have on its future survival.

"The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the most important onshore denning habitat for polar bears in the United States, and mother polar bears with cubs are increasingly denning in this area as Arctic Sea ice continues to decline," said Kristen Miller, acting director of the Alaska Wilderness League, in a statement.

She said: "We're glad to see Interior begin a new review, as the Southern Beaufort Sea bears are in jeopardy."