

Protecting Arctic Polar Bears

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The Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population in America's Arctic is the most imperiled population on the planet, having declined a stunning 50% during the past 30 years with its numbers continuing to fall. The mandate for oil and gas leasing and potential upcoming seismic exploration on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge threatens to cause undeniable harm to these polar bears.

Impacts of Oil Development

- The Arctic Refuge leasing program opens 100% of the Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population's critical habitat in the U.S. to development, bringing serious risks for this threatened species. Infrared technology for finding polar bear dens prior to seismic exploration misses 55% of dens, leaving dens at risk of being crushed by heavy machinery or mothers chased away, abandoning cubs.
- Polar bear experts have found that seismic exploration has the potential to disturb more than 96% of denning habitat on the coastal plain, likely leading to the death of mother polar bears and their cubs that are in hibernation.



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Legal Protections

Existing legal protections are currently in place for polar bears as it relates to any Arctic Refuge leasing program, though gaps still exist:

- The Marine Mammal Protection Act allows for the incidental "take" of polar bears. The FWS must make specific findings that it will be limited to "small numbers" and it will have no more than a "negligible impact" on populations before granting an Incidental Take Authorization.
- A one-mile buffer for oil and gas development is currently applied to polar bear dens offshore along the northern coast of Alaska under the existing Beaufort Sea Incidental Take Regulation. No such buffer zone exists onshore.



Climate Change

- The Arctic is warming nearly four times as fast as the rest of the globe. With sea ice rapidly disappearing, polar bears are forced to spend more time on land — an extra month each year compared to past trends.
- Polar bears' health is closely linked to the amount of sea ice available. When on land they can no longer effectively hunt typical prey like seals and are forced to fast, meaning they won't have sufficient fat for winter.
- Longer ice-free periods result in longer periods of fasting, producing smaller litter sizes that in turn impacts future generations of polar bears.

Bottom Line

The successful reproduction and continued survival of polar bears relies on the ability for bears to build dens in undisturbed landscapes, like the Coastal Plain. Oil companies want to perform damaging seismic exploration during the winter months — driving convoys of thumper trucks and bulldozers across the fragile Coastal Plain tundra — during the months when polar bears begin their denning. Industrialization cannot exist alongside these beloved, endangered species.



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