

PRESS RELEASE

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Secret state documents reveal Governor misrepresented State of Alaska's scientific review of polar bear listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Documents obtained today through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request of the federal government confirm earlier suspicions that Alaska Governor Sarah Palin erred in her assertion that a “comprehensive review” of the federal science on polar bears did not support their listing as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. The release of the state science review of polar bear status has been sought for many months (since December, 2007 by Rick Steiner, Professor, University of Alaska), but the Palin administration invoked a legal exemption to the state's Public Records Act allowing them to withhold the documents, which they asserted were “deliberative” and “pre-decisional.” It was widely suspected that the administration did not want the documents in the public because they would contradict and undermine the Governor's decision to oppose the federal listing. The state has since filed a notice of intent to sue the federal government over the listing.

The documents – the April 2007 expert scientific review by the ADFG Wildlife Conservation Division's marine mammal staff – were finally released today in response to a FOIA submitted by Steiner to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on May 5, 2008. Contrary to the Governor's statements and her position on the issue, the documents prove beyond any doubt that the state scientists agreed with the federal science on the issue.

After analyzing the various uncertainties in climate modeling and population modeling, the state marine mammal scientists concluded the following:

*We presumed that the projections of sea ice loss in the current scientific literature represent the best available information. Similarly, we also presumed that the relatively substantial amount of information in the scientific literature on polar bear ecology, including habitat use and predator prey dynamics, is applicable to polar bear subpopulations that have not been studied. Given these two critical assumptions and recognizing their significant associated uncertainties, **the finding that the polar bear will decline significantly across much of its range is supported** (emphasis added).*

This is the standard for listing as threatened under the federal ESA. The state marine mammal scientists went on to state their concern over the ability of polar bears to capture their primary prey – ringed seals – as sea ice continues to decline:

...as the extent of the summer sea ice hunting platform of polar bears decreases seals will be less available to bears. Based on documented polar bear behavior and energetics, the available scientific information does not indicate that bears would be able to consume sufficient quantities of prey while on land to sustain viable populations.

The Governor was well aware of the state scientific conclusion prior to making her decision to oppose the listing, prior to asserting in a letter to the New York Times that her opposition was based on a “comprehensive review” of the science.

“The Governor has some explaining to do here,” said Steiner. “The documents obtained today are the smoking gun in this case - the administration’s decision to oppose the federal listing of polar bears was based on politics, not science. This was suspected earlier when the state refused to release the very scientific review which they contended supported their decision, but now we have proof.”

“This matter calls into serious doubt the cornerstone of the Palin administration’s professed intent to be open, transparent, and honest with Alaskans about how policy decisions are made.”

Based on the documents released today, Steiner called on the state to drop its intended lawsuit of the federal government over the listing of polar bears. “When experts for the plaintiff – the State of Alaska - agree with the defendant – the federal government - you probably don’t have much of a case,” Steiner said. As well, he recommended that the \$2 million recently approved by the Governor for “a conference” in attempt to challenge the listing of polar bears and other species should be used instead for a comprehensive analysis of all threatened, endangered, depleted species in Alaska, identify all candidate species, and identify robust recovery plans for all such resources.

“It is time that the State of Alaska stopped denying the issue of climate change and its impacts on the state, and begins dealing with this issue honestly, deliberately, and aggressively.”