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News

10-12

May 4, 2010

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USFWS Releases Draft Economic Analysis of Polar Bear Critical Habitat

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announces a draft economic analysis of the potential impacts of designating critical habitat for the threatened polar bear. The Service also announces it will reopen the public comment period on the proposed designation of critical habitat for the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Both measures will be subject to a 60-day comment period that will open upon publication in the *Federal Register* on May 5, 2010.

The draft economic analysis provides estimated costs of the reasonably foreseeable potential economic impacts of the proposed critical habitat designation for the polar bear through 2039. This timeline pertains to the forecast of impacts to oil and gas exploration, development, and production, and associated construction projects, as these are the primary human activities occurring within the proposed critical habitat area.

Because polar bears already receive significant protection under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the ESA, costs associated with the designation of polar bear critical habitat are primarily associated with considering adverse modification of critical habitat as part of future ESA Section 7 consultations. The future (2010-2039) total incremental impacts (those estimated to occur because of critical habitat designation) are relatively small; total present value impacts over the 29-year period are estimated to be \$669,000 (an annualized impact of \$53,900).

Section 4(b)(2) of the ESA requires that the Service designate or revise critical habitat based upon the best scientific and commercial data available, after taking into consideration the economic impact, impact on national security, or any other relevant impact of specifying any particular area as critical habitat.

The draft economic analysis, prepared by Industrial Economics, Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, identifies, analyzes and quantifies the potential economic impacts associated with the proposed critical habitat designation for the polar bear. The economic impact of the proposed critical habitat designation is analyzed by comparing scenarios both "with critical habitat" and "without critical habitat." Since polar bears already receive significant protection under existing statutes, the baseline for this analysis recognizes that most costs associated with a proposed designation of critical habitat are related to additional consultation under Section 7 of the ESA.

Public information sessions and public hearings will be held on the draft economic analysis and the critical habitat proposal in Anchorage, Alaska on June 15, 2010 and in Barrow, Alaska on June 17, 2010. In each case, the information session will be held from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. and will include a short presentation and a question and answer session; the public hearing will be held from 8:00 p.m. to

10:00 p.m. and will be an opportunity for the public to record oral comments for the record. Written comments also will be accepted.

Copies of the critical habitat proposal and the draft economic analysis are available on the Internet at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/criticalhabitat.htm>. Both documents are available by contacting the Alaska Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office at 1-800-362-5148.

Comments may be submitted by one of the following methods:

Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments to Docket No. FWS-R7-ES-2009-0042.

U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R7-ES-2009-0042; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

All comments and the public hearing transcript will be posted on <http://www.regulations.gov>. This generally means that any personal information provided will be posted.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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