
Conservationist Accuses Administration of Cover Up

Bill McAllister / KTUU / May 2, 2008

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- A prominent marine conservation specialist is denouncing the Palin administration's refusal to release findings on polar bears by the state's marine mammal biologists.

Rick Steiner says the administration is covering up the fact that the governor made a strictly political decision in opposing the possible listing of polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Dr. Steiner said he expects the federal government to soon list polar bears as threatened. But what's at risk of extinction, Steiner says, is the governor's claim to running an open and transparent government.

Steiner has been dancing with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game since December over his written and oral requests to see scientific conclusions on polar bears reached by the state's marine mammal biologists.

Steiner, a professor with the University of Alaska's Marine Advisory Program, says he strongly suspects that the biologists did not recommend that Palin oppose the listing of polar bears as threatened under the endangered species act.

And with U.S. Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne under a judge's order to make a determination on the listing by May 15, Steiner wants to see at last whether the state biologists' conclusions supported Palin's position.

"I think a lot of people would still support her decision to oppose the listing," Steiner said. "But what we have to do is be honest and transparent about it, and be honest that the science looked reasonable."

Doug Vincent-Lang of the Department of Fish and Game said that while

individual biologists might have supported the listing, at least at one time, the overall scientific review resulted in the opposite conclusion.

"There simply is insufficient information to justify that this population, that is not significantly declining," he said. "That's higher than it's been in the last 40 years and that the uncertainty associated with climate modeling leaves us to suggest that the best available science says don't list."

As for the records request, Vincent-Lang said the administration has been working with Steiner to get his request for documents down to a manageable level.

"We currently have some information over at the Department of Law, and the lawyers are looking at it to determine what, if anything, should be released under the Alaska Public Records Act," he said.

Steiner said the administration needs to live up to its claim of being open and transparent.

"This issue of being open and transparent with the public of Alaska, well, that's easy to say, but more difficult to do, and here's a chance to do it, and they're not doing it," Steiner said.

Meanwhile, House Speaker John Harris said the Legislature has approved \$2 million for a national conference to challenge the listing, if it occurs.

"I think Alaska has to stand up for itself, because we're being dictated, in this case, we're being dictated, I think, by entities that aren't Alaska-based, that are outside of Alaska," Harris said.

Steiner said the issue is soon to be a done deal.

"I don't get that," Steiner said. "That's kind of the conference to nowhere, in my book. The decision will be made in the next week or

two, and then it's a done deal."

Either way, state policy makers have had their say, even if they're not anxious to explain how they arrived at their positions.

The listing is controversial because it would be based upon the loss of sea ice habitat due to global warming, which some fear would be a precedent that could stifle development, especially oil and gas recovery.

But Steiner said the petroleum industry already has to work around listed wildlife, and would still be able to operate.

If Steiner doesn't get the documents before the Interior Department makes a decision on the listing of polar bears as threatened, he doesn't think it will be irrelevant. He says he'll even consider legal action.

While seeing the documentation might be moot in terms of the federal government's decision, he says it will reveal something about the governor's decision-making process, and perhaps alert the public to the possibility that she places political decisions over science.

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