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Save the Polar Bear

To the Editor:

It is deeply troubling that a legally mandated and urgently needed decision to protect polar bears under the Endangered Species Act has been delayed by one agency of the Interior Department even as another agency rushes ahead with plans to sell oil and gas leases across a huge expanse of critical polar bear habitat in Alaska's Chukchi Sea ("Regulatory Games and the Polar Bear," editorial, Jan. 15).

Critics in and out of Congress have been quick to question the motives for the delay. Of course, the critics could be wrong, but if so, the responsibility for setting them right rests with one man: Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne.

He can do so in one of two ways: either by heeding the advice of scientists calling for the polar bear to be listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act; or, at the very least, by delaying the lease sale while the complexities of the proposed listing are sorted out.

It's worth recalling that 10 years ago, the then-Senator Kempthorne risked the wrath of his leadership by reaching across party lines to help reform the Endangered Species Act. He did so and won the support of the Clinton administration and Senate Democrats by maintaining the underpinnings of sound science as the basis for all E.S.A. decisions.

He also pushed the idea that listing decisions must move quickly, and not be delayed by bureaucracy, so that businesses and people can plan their actions accordingly.

These principles are no less relevant today than they were 10 years ago. Indeed, the fate of the polar bear, whose Arctic habitat is literally melting away, may depend on them. Secretary Kempthorne needs to do the right thing by following the model of Senator Kempthorne.

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