

Polar bear remains a species 'of special concern': federal body

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[CBC News](#)

A federal committee has repeated its declaration that the Canadian polar bear is a species "of special concern."

The designation is two steps down from "endangered" and one down from "threatened."



This polar bear was found wandering more than 300 kilometres south of its usual range towards Fort McPherson, N.W.T., last summer. The bear has retained its status as a species 'of special concern,' a federal committee said Friday. (CBC)

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, known as COSEWIC, announced the decision Friday in Yellowknife, where it had spent the week discussing the status of 31 species.

It is the fourth time that the committee, an arm's-length scientific group that advises the federal government on species that should be protected, has assessed the polar bear as a species of special concern.

Committee chairman Jeff Hutchings said the polar bear was "one of the most challenging species ever assessed," citing different conditions among the numerous polar bear populations across Canada's North.

"In the northeastern part of the range, between Baffin Island and Greenland, it's quite clear that overhunting, overharvesting is a significant threat to the polar bear in that area," Hutchings told CBC Newsworld in an interview Friday.

"By contrast, in parts of western Hudson Bay and in what's called the southern Beaufort Sea ... it seems quite clear that declines in the amount of summer sea ice attributable to climate change are causing reductions in polar bears in those areas."

'Special concern' best captures bear's status

However, Hutchings noted that polar bear populations in other parts of Canada have stable or even rising in numbers.

"Nonetheless, as a species, as a unit in Canada, 'special concern' seemed to best capture the conservation status of this species," he said.

"And indeed, if the declines that polar bears are experiencing in some places are not managed effectively, then the status of the bear will deteriorate considerably."



COSEWIC chairman Jeff Hutchings said the 'special concern' status is best for the polar bear, which has declining populations in some parts of Canada's North and stable or even rising numbers in other parts. (CBC)

Ottawa first listed the polar bear as a species of special concern in 1991. It kept the status in subsequent assessments in 1999 and 2002.

In 2004, COSEWIC's recommendation to put the polar bear on the "special concern" list was turned down by Ottawa, which sent the matter back to the committee over what it said was a lack of traditional aboriginal knowledge in the assessment.

The polar bear is among 24 species that are being recommended for addition to the Species at Risk Act, including 16 endangered species, four threatened species and four of special concern.

COSEWIC's recommendations will be forwarded in August to Environment Minister John Baird. Ultimately, cabinet will make a final decision on what species should be listed under the Species at Risk Act.

Baird promises to take action

While the committee's recommendation maintains the status quo on the polar bear's status, some environmental activists and polar bear experts have sought the more serious "threatened" status.

In Ottawa, Baird told reporters that he will wait to receive COSEWIC's report before saying how the government will proceed on deciding whether to accept the committee's recommendation.

At the same time, he promised immediate action on polar bears, recognizing "real concerns" by people in some parts of Canada about a listing.

"We're committed to taking action to help turn this situation around," Baird said at a news conference Friday.

"Let's not wait until we get a designation of threatened or even that the species [is] at risk. Let's take action now and that's exactly what we're going to do.

Baird said would be consulting with environmentalists and Inuit people, as well as the governments of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Manitoba and Ontario.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to announce whether it will recommend a "threatened" listing for the bear under its Endangered Species Act.

That decision, which was expected in January, is now anticipated to be announced sometime this summer.

COSEWIC's Hutchings could not comment on whether the U.S. government's decision would affect the polar bear's status in Canada.

Ottawa estimates that about 15,000 polar bears exist in Canada. Management of those bears is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments, with scientific expertise from Environment Canada.

Hunters demand compensation in case of quota cuts

The status of polar bears came up at another meeting earlier this week in Nunavut, where Inuit hunters clashed with the territorial government over whether to cut hunting quotas in the Baffin Bay region.

The Nunavut Wildlife Management Board held public hearings Tuesday and Wednesday in Pond Inlet, as it considers the Nunavut government's request to slash the polar bear hunting quota in Baffin Bay, or even put a moratorium on the hunt there.

Territorial government scientists have said shrinking sea ice and overhunting are affecting not only the number of bears around Baffin Bay, but also their body weights,

leading to skinnier bears. But hunters argued that the bears are losing weight because there are so many of them competing for food.

Some Inuit hunters said they want the Nunavut government to compensate them if the polar bear quota is cut.

"We should get more money for cutting the polar bears [quota], like \$25,000 for each bear," James Qilliq, a member of the hunters and trappers organization in Clyde River, told CBC News on Wednesday.

The hunters also called on the government to protect people from polar bears that may wander into their communities, should the hunt be reduced or banned.

2 Ontario species named to endangered list

Two Ontario-based species are being recommended as additions to the endangered species list.

COSEWIC named the rapids clubtail dragonfly, which can only be found along parts of two southern Ontario rivers. Urban development is threatening the dragonfly's habitat, the committee concluded.

It also named the fawnsfoot, a once-popular southern Ontario freshwater mussel that is struggling against an invasive species.

As well, the committee upgraded the eastern foxsnake of Ontario from a threatened species to endangered, citing the loss of the foxsnake's wetland habitat.

Staying on the endangered list is the Vancouver Island marmot and the spotted owl, both of which are found in British Columbia.

The committee noted that 20 spotted owls remain in the country, with their numbers declining largely because of disappearing old-growth forests.

The committee also wants the western chorus frog, which is native to Quebec and southeastern Ontario, to be added to Canada's at-risk list as a threatened species. The number of the small, quarter-sized frogs have declined over the years due to development and a loss of wetlands, the committee concluded.