



**THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY INDEPENDENCE AND GLOBAL WARMING**

**Opening Statement for Chairman Edward J. Markey
“On Thin Ice: The Future of the Polar Bear”
January 17, 2008**

The impacts of global warming are often discussed in the future tense, but, as we will hear today, the Arctic is already feeling the strain of the dangerous buildup of heat-trapping pollution in our atmosphere. Hardly a week passes without another discovery of new and accelerating ways that global warming is impacting the Arctic region – global warming’s ground zero.

In the fall, scientists reported that as a result of the warming planet, the 2007 summer Arctic sea ice melt was likely the greatest of the last century -- an astonishing 23 percent greater than the previous record set in 2005. A recent study by scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) projected that the Arctic Ocean could be devoid of ice by 2040. Furthermore, Dr. Jay Zwally, a leading NASA scientist recently re-analyzed sea ice data and projected that the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free in summertime as early as 2012 – just four short years from now.

The presence of Arctic sea ice is essential for many forms of animal and plant life, but particularly for the polar bear. Polar bears use these ice floes as a platform for nearly every aspect of their lives, including hunting their primary food source. The disappearance of sea ice as a result of global warming is leading to the very real possibility that polar bears will disappear as well.

The Bush Administration’s own scientists project that the prospects for the polar bear’s survival are bleak. Last year, Dr. Steven Amstrup, who is with us today, headed up a team of scientists charged with examining the impacts of sea ice loss on polar bear populations. In a series of reports released last fall, Dr. Amstrup’s team concluded that by mid-century, two-thirds of all the world’s polar bears could disappear and that polar bears could be gone entirely from Alaska. Dr. Amstrup’s team also noted that based on recent observations, this dire assessment could actually be conservative.

The actions of the Bush Administration in the coming months could very well determine the fate of this iconic animal. The Interior Department is currently considering whether to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act as a result of the impacts of global warming. While this decision has been nearly three years in the making, last week the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that it was going to delay any decisions beyond its statutorily required deadline – that legal protection for the polar bear would be put on ice while its critical habitat continues to melt.

Meanwhile, the Interior Department is revving up its regulatory machine to allow new oil drilling in sensitive polar bear habitat. Earlier this month, the Minerals Management Service finalized its plan to move forward early next month with an oil and gas lease sale of nearly 30 million acres in the Chukchi Sea, an area that is essential habitat for polar bears in the United States.

The timing of these two decisions leaves the door open for the Administration to give Big Oil the rights to this polar bear habitat the moment before the protections for the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act go into effect. Rushing to allow drilling in polar bear habitat before protecting the bear would be the epitome of this Administration's backwards energy policy – a policy of drill first and ask questions later.

In this situation, as in many things in life, order matters. You don't put on your shoes before your socks. You don't start driving before looking at a map. You don't buy your Patriots Super Bowl shirt before the game. And we shouldn't sell the drilling rights in this important polar bear habitat before deciding how we are going to protect them. It seems that every time there is a choice between extraction and extinction in this Administration, extraction wins. That must not be the case for the polar bear.