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The Latest Environmental Victims: The Polar Bear and the Sage Grouse

By The Editorial Board

Ed Markey, the tireless Massachusetts Democrat and Speaker Nancy Pelosi's brilliant choice to run a Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, hauled officials from the Interior Department into his committee room last week.

His mission: to find out why they had decided to delay endangered species protections for the polar bear while, at the same time, blasting full speed ahead with oil and gas leasing in the Alaskan waters the polar bear calls home.

The Interior witnesses included Dale Hall, the deputy assistant secretary for fish and wildlife who seems increasingly to be the scapegoat for a drill-at-all-costs (including imperiled wildlife) policy that could only have been dreamed up by Vice President Dick Cheney.

Mr. Markey also heard from environmentalists, who argued that the polar bear is in enough trouble already from global warming without oil and gas rigs invading its territory.

The environmentalists also raised deep-seated, and in our view well-founded, suspicions that once again the administration was putting its political interests and the commercial interests of its friends in the oil and gas business ahead of the interests not only of the polar bear but of conservation generally.

It would hardly be the first time the administration has done so. In late April of last year, a woman named Julie A. McDonald, who was Mr. Hall's predecessor, resigned her post shortly after the department's inspector general found that she had violated federal regulations by giving industry lobbyists internal documents and by running roughshod over agency scientists.

One of the charges against Ms. McDonald was that she had heavily edited reports from departmental biologists on the sage grouse, a species whose habitat overlapped with vast areas of the Rocky Mountain west coveted by oil and gas interests. Listing the

species, which remains unprotected, could have curbed industry's access to federal lands.

Ms. McDonald, who has moved on to other lines of work, was not on the witness list but her presence was powerfully felt in the committee room. As Jamie Rappaport Clark, who occupied the same job in the Clinton Administration, and who is now executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife, noted in her testimony, there is hardly a single federal agency that has been left untouched by the Bush administration's relentless manipulation of science for political ends. The polar bear may simply turn out to be the latest victim.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Hall and the other administration witnesses insisted the bear would get a fair shake, that the only reason for the delay was that the matter was scientifically very complicated, and that in any case the leases with the oil companies would be crammed with restrictions, prohibitions and cautions aimed at protecting the bear. It is a line the department has been assiduously promoting, with some success, to the media.

Mr. Markey remained skeptical. For one thing, nobody has actually seen the language in the leases, or much of the underlying documentation for Interior's claim that drilling can be made safe for the bears. And then there's that distressing history of political manipulation.

Right after the hearing, Mr. Markey introduced a bill that would force Interior to list the bear first before proceeding with the leases. Interior would save everyone, including the poor polar bear, a lot of trouble if it followed this sequence on its own.