

Alaska legislator claims 1 in 10 darted polar bears dies

March 26 2013, by Richard Mauer

On March 1, in response to Alaska losing its appeal of the threatened-species designation for polar bears, state Rep. Eric Feige said the federal government itself was responsible for the deaths of many bears.

"If the polar bear are so threatened, then why do we kill 10 percent of the ones we dart and tag for scientific and management purposes?" Feige said in prepared statement issued by the Alaska House majority press office.

He provided no source for his startling assertion.

In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says, two polar bears have been killed in the Alaska Arctic since 2003 as a result of its research program. About 1,220 were darted.

That works out to one-sixteenth of 1 percent, or one-sixtieth of Feige's number.

Feige, R-Chickaloon, the co-chairman of the House Resources Committee, traveled to Washington, D.C., on state business the week after issuing the statement and didn't return calls seeking an explanation. But on Friday, his turn came up to attend the weekly news conference of the Republican majority caucus in the House.

"It comes from personal experience," Feige said of his source. "Not direct personal experience, but I spend a lot of time flying around the

state and I happen to know the guy that flies the Super Cub that does the polar surveys along the coast," he said.

"The helicopter pilots are based out of Deadhorse and - lately it's been R44s (a lightweight utility helicopter), couple of them, they have inflatable floats to get around and land on, occasionally the bears come into Deadhorse and chew on the floats and that causes great headaches for the pilots. It was conversations with those people, folks actually doing the surveys, that told me 10 percent died."

"They dart the bear, anesthetize the bear, and in the process of doing that, 10 percent are fatal," Feige said. "I talked to the person doing the work and that's what they told me."

Bruce Woods, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, said that about 100 bears a year have been darted in the southern Beaufort Sea area since 2003, or about 1,000 bears. Another 220 were darted in the Chukchi Sea region.

One of those bears drowned in 2005, he said. One other was accidentally asphyxiated in a sling in 2009. Both fatalities occurred in the southern Beaufort region. There were no other deaths, Woods said.

"Since the late 1990s we've been using Telazol when darting bears, which has proven to be far more effective and safe for the animals than drugs used previously," Woods said in a follow-up e-mail. "The bears are darted so they can be handled/examined safely."

For the protection of both bear and researcher, the animals are tranquilized before being fitted with radio collars, Wood said.

Environmental representatives who have been fighting on behalf of polar bears said they believe the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) numbers.

"I would be shocked it would be anywhere near 10 percent," said Rebecca Noblin, an attorney in Anchorage with the Center for Biological Diversity, a frequent legal party for and against the government in environmental cases. "I haven't heard of any incidents in recent years where polar bears have been killed by Fish and Wildlife - and we would hear if that happened. They'd have to report it."

"If this was truly happening, it would be something that many of us would've heard about already and then called into question the government's methods," said Dan Howells, Greenpeace deputy campaign director based in San Francisco. "I would find it quite surprising if that were the case."

Michael LeVine, an attorney with Oceana in Juneau, said: "It's ludicrous to think that they're killing 10 percent of the ones they're darting, and if they were, it would be a really serious problem. The agencies have to permit themselves to do those kinds of studies, so somewhere there's an internal review process. Someone would've been able to find out about it if it were true.

"I have never heard of any number that approaches the ones that the representative was talking about - and I've never heard about it with any kind of scientific testing," LeVine added.

In 2008, citing the loss of habitat due to global warming, the Interior Department listed [polar bears](#) as a threatened species. The state challenged the designation, arguing polar bear populations were healthy and that the listing could hurt economic development projects in the Arctic like off-shore oil drilling. The state lost in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in 2011 and lost again on appeal March 1.

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