

Commentary

The U.S. Must Live Up to Commitments as Arctic Nation

Rep. Rick Larsen

Interest in the Arctic is heating up around the world. As the region's ice melts and it becomes more accessible to shipping traffic, Arctic nations like Russia and Canada are continuing to invest in infrastructure and research. Countries without Arctic borders, including China and Japan, also are expressing their interest in the region. China, for example, is currently building its second icebreaker.

It is clear that other countries are moving forward in the High North. But the U.S. is not keeping pace. Even as the U.S. took over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council in April 2015, we do not have the infrastructure that is necessary to live up to our responsibilities as an Arctic nation. President Obama's [GLACIER conference](#) in August 2015 is a sign that attention to the Arctic is growing, but that attention must come with investment to be effective.

I am hopeful that during the U.S. chairmanship of the Council we will make progress on the strong priorities the U.S. State Department has defined. These include protecting the unique Arctic environment and the people and animals who live there, as well as improving our emergency response ability when ships get into trouble.

But the U.S. faces a steep opportunity curve when it comes to the Arctic, and we need to do more to fulfill our commitments. While most of my colleagues in Congress recognize that the U.S. has

responsibilities as an Atlantic and Pacific nation, not everyone recognizes that we are also an Arctic nation. That needs to change. Before policymakers can make informed decisions about Arctic investments, they need to know why this area is so critical.

That is why I worked with Congressman Young from Alaska to start the [Congressional Arctic Working Group](#). The Working Group seeks to help members of Congress better understand the opportunities and challenges for the U.S. as an Arctic nation, and it acts as a resource for other Arctic countries to interact with Congress.

Since its inception a year ago, the Working Group has raised awareness about the importance of the Arctic through events for Members and their staff to meet with Arctic officials from other Arctic nations, as well as a variety of stakeholders.

We held a discussion with Norway's State Secretary, heard from Canada's Senior Arctic Official about the recent Canadian Arctic Council chairmanship, and held a briefing with senior State Department officials to discuss the agenda for the U.S. chairmanship. The Working Group also hosted representatives of indigenous groups from Russia. Continuing international engagement with all the members of the Arctic Council is critical, and the Working Group is filling that role in Congress.

There are other steps the U.S. should take. Every Arctic nation except the U.S. has an ambassador-level position dedicated to Arctic affairs. The U.S. should join its peers by creating such a position, which is why I [introduced a bill](#) with Congressman Sensenbrenner to do just that. An Ambassador to the Arctic would help the U.S. better manage our many interests in the region, as well as signal our country's commitment to international cooperation on Arctic policy.

The U.S. [also does not have the icebreaking capability](#) to fulfill research and commercial missions in the uniquely icy seas. The U.S. Coast Guard has said it needs at least three each of heavy and medium duty icebreakers. But currently the U.S. only has one of each, and other countries have jumped far ahead of us on this front. Russia is currently building its 23rd government-owned icebreaker. Without this capacity, the U.S. will be unable to fulfill the environmental protection, research, search and rescue, and interdiction operations the Coast Guard must perform in the Arctic.

Just because the Arctic is at a high latitude does not mean the U.S. should ignore it. Other countries certainly are paying attention. I am hopeful the Congressional Arctic Working Group will continue to bring more attention to a part of the world we cannot afford to neglect.