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Report to Congressional Requesters

May 2014

ARCTIC ISSUES

Better Direction and Management of Voluntary Recommendations Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation

GAO-14-435

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-14-435, a report to congressional requesters

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Better Direction and Management of Voluntary Recommendations Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent changes in the Arctic from a warming climate, such as decreased sea ice coverage making marine areas more accessible, have increased global attention to the region's economic opportunities. In 1996, the eight Arctic States—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States—formed the Arctic Council to promote cooperation on various Arctic issues with input from indigenous groups. U.S. Arctic policy highlights the importance of the Council to pursue U.S. Arctic interests.

GAO was asked to examine matters related to U.S. Council participation. This report examines (1) the Council's organization and how it addresses environmental and economic development issues; (2) how key U.S. agencies participate in the Council and any challenges; and (3) agencies' actions to implement and manage voluntary Council recommendations and any challenges. GAO analyzed key documents; interviewed federal and other Arctic stakeholders; attended a Council meeting; and visited four Alaskan Arctic communities selected for their sizes and needs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State work with relevant agencies to develop a strategy identifying direction for agency Council participation and resource needs; develop a process to review and track progress on recommendations; and work with other Arctic States to develop guidelines for clear and prioritized recommendations. State agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-14-435. For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Arctic Council (Council) is a voluntary intergovernmental forum for Arctic States, with involvement of indigenous organizations and other stakeholders, to address various environmental and economic issues through projects and reports targeting a variety of subjects. The eight Arctic States guide the work of the Council through consensus decisions and rotate the chairmanship of the Council every 2 years. The United States will assume the chairmanship in 2015. The participants meet in six working groups, four task forces, and various expert groups to produce such documents as scientific assessments and guidance. For example, the Council has produced assessments of Arctic climate change impacts and shipping. As Arctic issues have emerged, the Council has expanded and broadened its work to address them. For example, since the Council's was established in 1996, the number of ongoing projects has increased from about 30 to 80.

Six key federal agencies hold leadership roles in the Arctic Council and other agencies participate through the Council's working groups and task forces. The U.S. Department of State (State) leads this participation and collaborates with the five other key agencies that lead the delegations to Council working groups—the Environmental Protection Agency, National Nuclear Security Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Global Change Research Program—as well as other federal agencies with Arctic interests. In collaborating on Council work, the agencies face challenges by not having a clear direction or specific resources for their work. For example, key agency officials said that the agencies do not have a strategy that guides and aligns their Council work. Without a clear direction or specific resources for the collaborative effort, the agencies face challenges prioritizing the work, delivering unified messages to other Arctic States, and consistently participating in the Council. GAO previously reported that agencies can enhance and sustain collaborative efforts by engaging in various practices, such as establishing joint strategies and identifying necessary resources.

Federal agencies have acted on some voluntary recommendations that the United States and other Arctic States have adopted through the Council. However, State does not review or track progress made on these actions and faces challenges implementing the voluntary recommendations. Specifically, State informally discusses the recommendations with other agencies during monthly meetings but does not have a process to review and track progress the agencies have made toward implementing them. State officials said that the agency may need to more formally assess such progress because, without such a process, State does not know the status of recommendation implementation and faces challenges planning for and prioritizing future actions to address Arctic issues. In addition, the United States—with State as the lead agency—and other Arctic States face challenges implementing the Council's broad and numerous recommendations. To address these challenges, State officials said that the Council needs to more clearly specify and prioritize recommendations, but the Council does not have guidelines for doing so. Without such guidelines, officials said the recommendations have not historically produced actions with measurable outcomes.

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Abbreviations

BOEM	Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
Council	Arctic Council
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
IMO	International Maritime Organization
NNSA	National Nuclear Security Administration
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
SAO	Senior Arctic Officials
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
USGCRP	U.S. Global Change Research Program

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Congressional Requesters

A warming climate is changing the Arctic environment and bringing economic development opportunities to the region.[1] For example, over the 50-year period ending in 2009, average annual temperatures in Alaska have increased by 1.9 degrees Celsius (3.4 degrees Fahrenheit), more than twice the average global temperature rise for this period.[2] In addition, the coverage of summer sea ice has declined at an average rate of about 14 percent per decade since 1979, reaching its lowest point on record in 2012, according to the National Snow and Ice Data Center.[3]

As Arctic marine areas become more accessible, the region has attracted increasing global attention for its economic opportunities. For example, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated in 2008 that the Arctic has approximately 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil resources.[4] In addition, trans-Arctic shipping routes are thousands of miles shorter than traditional routes between the Atlantic Ocean and Asia, and traffic through the Bering Strait increased from 217 vessels in 2008 to 484 vessels in 2012 and 434 vessels in 2013, according to data from the Coast Guard. However, potential increased economic development opportunities bring

[1]In general, the Arctic is the polar region located at the northernmost part of the Earth. Arctic stakeholders define the Arctic geographical area in different ways. For example, the Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984 defines the Arctic as all U.S. and foreign territory north of the Arctic Circle and all U.S. territory north and west of the boundary formed by the Porcupine, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers [in Alaska]; all contiguous seas, including the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort, Bering, and Chukchi Seas; and the Aleutian Chain. Pub. L. No. 98-373, 98 Stat. 1242,1248 (1984), *codified at* 15 U.S.C. § 4111. The Arctic Circle is the line of latitude located at 66° 33' 44" North of the equator. Other definitions of the Arctic use markers such as the southernmost extent of winter sea ice for oceanic boundaries, or the northern-most tree line for terrestrial boundaries.

[2] Thomas R. Karl, Jerry M. Melillo, and Thomas C. Peterson, eds., *Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States* (Cambridge University Press: 2009).

[3]The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration established the National Snow and Ice Data Center in 1976 to support research into the cryosphere—places on earth where water is frozen into ice or snow. For more information, see http://www.nsidc.org.

[4]U.S. Geological Survey Fact Sheet 2008-3049: Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle. http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/.

increased concerns about possible pollution risks from oil spills and accidents, as well as challenges responding to such incidents in the region. Amid these environmental and economic changes, many indigenous people of the Arctic struggle to maintain their traditional way of life that relies on the ecosystem for subsistence resources.[5]

These complex and interrelated Arctic issues transcend borders and increase the importance of cooperation among the Arctic States—Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (Denmark), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation (Russia), Sweden, and the United States—as they address common challenges and opportunities.[6] The Arctic States began coordinating officially through the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy adopted in 1991 and formed the Arctic Council (Council) in 1996 to promote cooperation, coordination, and interaction on Arctic issues, particularly those related to environmental protection and sustainable economic development.[7] The Council's charter expressly omitted matters related to military security. The Council's chair rotates among each of the eight Arctic States every 2 years. Canada assumed the chair in 2013, and the United States will succeed it as chair in 2015.

U.S. Arctic policy and strategy highlight the importance of working with other Arctic States through forums such as the Council to pursue U.S. Arctic interests, including protecting the environment, managing resources, involving indigenous communities and the state of Alaska, and supporting scientific research.[8] The U.S. Department of State (State)

[5]A 2013 interagency report on Arctic Management states that a subsistence way of life relies upon natural resources for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and the maintenance of cultural traditions. J.P. Clement, J.L. Bengston, and B.P. Kelly, Interagency Working Group on Coordination of Domestic Energy Development and Permitting in Alaska (D.J. Hayes, Chair), *Managing for the Future in a Rapidly Changing Arctic: A report to the President* (Washington, D.C.: March 2013).

[6]The Arctic States all have territory north of the Arctic Circle. The Kingdom of Denmark includes Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

[7]Through the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, the Arctic States agreed to, among other things, cooperate in scientific research, assess potential environmental impacts of development activities, and to hold regular meetings to assess the progress made and to coordinate future action.

[8]The White House, *2009 National Security Presidential Directive-66/Homeland Security Presidential Directive-25* (NSPD-66/HSPD-25), (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 9, 2009); the White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2013).

leads the U.S. participation in the Council and coordinates the related work of five other key federal agencies with a leadership role in the U.S. delegation—the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP)—as well as other federal agencies, such as the Coast Guard and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), that play various roles in the Council.[9]

We have previously reported on emerging issues and challenges for the United States in the Arctic. For example, we have reported on Alaska Native villages threatened by flooding and coastal erosion, finding that no single federal agency manages and allocates the limited assistance available to protect and relocate these villages.[10] In addition, in March 2014, we reported on U.S. Arctic maritime infrastructure challenges and the actions taken by federal, state, and local stakeholders to plan for future Arctic maritime infrastructure investments.[11] We have included a list of related products at the end of this report.

You asked us to review matters related to U.S. participation in the Council. Our objectives were to examine (1) how the Council is organized and how it addresses environmental and economic development issues; (2) how U.S. federal agencies with a key leadership role participate in the Council and the associated challenges, if any; and (3) the actions State and other federal agencies have taken to implement and manage voluntary recommendations the United States has adopted through the Council and associated challenges, if any.

To address these objectives, we analyzed documents and reports from the Council and reviewed relevant literature from government entities, academic sources, and nongovernmental organizations. We also

[9]These six agencies with a leadership role head the U.S. delegations to the Council's ongoing work.

[10]GAO, *Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress Has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion*, GAO-09-551 (Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2009).

[11]GAO, *Maritime Infrastructure: Key Issues Related to Commercial Activity in the U.S. Arctic over the Next Decade,* GAO-14-299 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 19, 2014).

interviewed (1) knowledgeable officials from State and other U.S. agencies with a lead role in the U.S. delegation to the Council; (2) leaders of organizations that represent Alaska Natives in the Council; and (3) Arctic stakeholders including state of Alaska officials, Alaska Natives, representatives of nongovernmental organizations with Arctic interests, and academics that we selected by referral from key federal agency officials and based on their experience participating in the Council or their knowledge of its work. In addition, we attended a Council coordination meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, and conducted site visits to the Arctic Alaskan communities of Barrow, Kivalina, Kotzebue, and Wainwright. We identified these communities through stakeholder referrals and a review of literature and reports describing the issues facing Alaskan communities, and selected them to include a range of community sizes and needs, as well as their accessibility.[12] We also analyzed Council documents from 1998 to 2013 to identify recommendations made by the Council to Arctic States. Appendix I provides additional information about our objectives, scope, and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2012 to May 2014 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

This section discusses the origins of the Council and other international forums for addressing Arctic issues, U.S. Arctic policy, and key Arctic issues.

Arctic Council Origins and Other International Forums for Addressing Arctic Issues

The Ottawa Declaration, signed in 1996 by the eight Arctic States, formally established the Council as an intergovernmental forum with the involvement of Arctic indigenous communities and others. The eight Arctic States are Council members and have exclusive decision-making responsibilities. The Ottawa Declaration named three Arctic indigenous

[12]The findings from our interviews with these communities cannot be generalized to those we did not include but provide examples of communities' interaction with federal agencies to address Arctic issues.

organizations as “Permanent Participants” and opened such status to other Arctic indigenous organizations that met specified criteria, as well as observer status for non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations that can contribute to the Council’s work. The chairmanship of the Council rotates among the eight Arctic States. Appendix II lists the chairmanships since the Council’s inception.

In addition to the Council, other international treaties, fora, and organizations exist that cover specific Arctic issues. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) treaty provides a legal framework governing the uses of the oceans and its resources. The treaty gives coastal states exclusive sovereign rights to explore and use the natural resources, including oil and gas, of their continental shelves.[13] In addition, it establishes a procedure for coastal states that intend to establish the outer limits of their continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles, when it extends that far. The United States is the only Arctic State that is not a party to UNCLOS, but supports and observes it as customary international law and practice, as stated in the National Strategy for the Arctic Region.[14] However, without ratifying UNCLOS, the United States cannot make claims or participate in the proceedings to establish states’ outer limits on their continental shelves.

Next, through an informal forum, the five Arctic States with coastal territory above the Arctic Circle—Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States—adopted the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008.[15] The declaration stated, in part, that these five states remained committed to the legal framework of UNCLOS and saw no need to develop a new comprehensive legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean. In addition, at a February 2014 meeting, these five states agreed to work toward preventing unregulated commercial fishing in the central Arctic Ocean and conduct additional scientific research.

[13]The continental shelf is the seabed and subsoil of the submarine areas that extend either (1) beyond the state’s territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin or (2) to a distance of 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured where the outer edge of the continental margin does not extend up to that distance.

[14]White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2013).

[15]Arctic Ocean Conference, *Ilulissat Declaration* (Ilulissat, Greenland: May 27-29, 2008).

Finally, all eight Arctic States work through the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a United Nations agency, on issues related to the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships. The IMO expects to complete in 2014 a mandatory International Code of safety for ships operating in polar waters, which it terms the Polar Code.[16]

U.S. Arctic Policy

The United States has articulated its interests in the Arctic since the early 1970s. Three key documents that guide current U.S. Arctic policy and management recognize the importance of the Council in pursuing U.S. Arctic interests but do not expressly guide U.S. participation in the Council. First, the *Arctic Region Policy* issued in 2009 specifies U.S. priorities in the Arctic related to national security, international governance, international scientific cooperation, economic issues, environmental protection, and maritime transportation.[17] The policy recognized, among other things, the establishment and ongoing work of the Council and that the United States participates in the Council to promote U.S. interests in the region. Second, in May 2013 the administration issued the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* that articulates U.S. strategic priorities in the Arctic and the federal, state, and international partners that are involved in the Arctic dialogue.[18] The strategy states that the United States participates in international forums like the Council to promote U.S. interests in the region and that the United States will pursue agreements that advance collective interests, promote shared Arctic State prosperity, protect the Arctic environment, and enhance regional security, among other things. The administration released an implementation plan in January 2014 identifying the methodology, process, and approach for executing the strategy and recognizing the importance of international engagement for successfully managing the Arctic Region.[19] Third, a 2013 report on Arctic management

[16]The Polar Code will cover the full range of design, construction, equipment, operational, training, search and rescue and environmental protection matters relevant to ships operating in the Arctic and Antarctic.

[17]White House, *Arctic Region Policy*, National Security Presidential Directive/NSPD-66 and Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-25 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 9, 2009).

[18]White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2013).

[19]White House, *Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 30, 2014).

produced by an interagency group recognizes the expert advice the Council provides on a range of subjects and recommended that the United States continue to play an active role in the Council.[20]

Key Arctic Issues

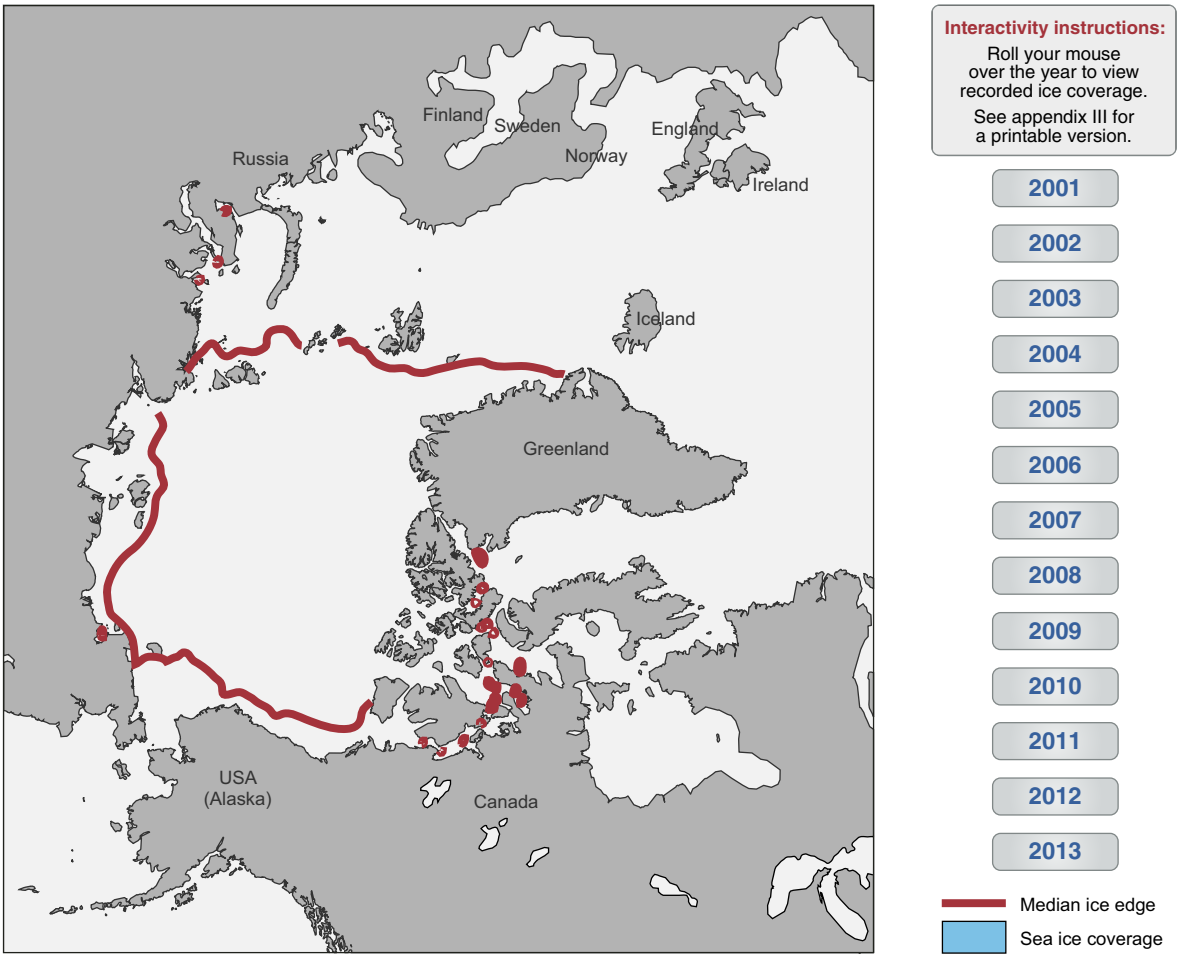
Numerous scientific studies, assessments, and government reports have documented the widespread changes occurring in the Arctic and their local and global implications. Climate change affects many of these issues because warming in the Arctic has exceeded the warming in the rest of the world. Scientists have documented the wide-ranging effects of such warming on various aspects of the Arctic environment.[21] For example, the coverage of Arctic sea ice has steadily declined since 1979, when satellite measurements became available. As shown in figure 1, an interactive graphic, sea ice coverage in the years from 2001 to 2013 had decreased compared to the 1979-2000 average, reaching its lowest coverage in 2012 (see app. III, fig. 7, for a printable version).

[20]J.P. Clement, J.L. Bengston, and B.P. Kelly, Interagency Working Group on Coordination of Domestic Energy Development and Permitting in Alaska (D.J. Hayes, Chair), *Managing for the Future in a Rapidly Changing Arctic. A report to the President* (Washington, D.C.: March 2013).

[21]C.J. Markon, S.F. Trainor, and F.S. Chapin III, eds., *The United States National Climate Assessment—Alaska Technical Chapter, U.S. Geological Survey Circular 1379* (2012).

Interactive Graphic

Figure 1: Change in Summer Minimum Ice Coverage from 2001 to 2013, Compared with the 1979-2000 Median Minimum Ice Coverage



Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center.

Note: The median ice edge displays the average annual minimum position of the ice edge.

In addition to declining sea ice coverage, rising Arctic temperatures cause thawing of the permafrost—permanently frozen ground, according to the 2009 USGCRP report.[22] A 2012 Council report states that such thawing can decrease the stability of infrastructure such as buildings, roads, pipelines, and airports, and it affects natural ecosystems through ground surface collapse and draining of lakes, among other things.[23] Also, particularly when combined with increased wave action from reduced sea ice coverage, the less stable ground becomes susceptible to coastal erosion, affecting coastal villages and community members. For example, in 2009, we reported that at least 12 Alaska Native villages decided to relocate or explore relocation options due to imminent threats from coastal erosion. Finally, as the permafrost thaws, contaminants frozen in the ice and soils can release into the air, water, and land, according to the 2012 Council report. Various Council reports state that the thawing, along with increased human activity in the region, can introduce contaminants into the Arctic ecosystem, including persistent organic pollutants and mercury.[24]

Climate change also affects the Arctic Ocean's chemistry, increasing its acidity as the ocean absorbs the increasing amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, according to the 2013 interagency Arctic management report. This report stated that such ocean acidification could have consequences for the entire Arctic marine ecosystem, including possible detrimental effects on species of fish important for subsistence communities and commercial fisheries.[25]

The environmental changes in the Arctic have affected the region's people and ecosystems, but they have also brought about economic development opportunities. Specifically, according to a 2014

[22]Thomas R. Karl, Jerry M. Melillo, and Thomas C. Peterson, eds., *Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States* (Cambridge University Press: 2009).

[23]Arctic Council Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, *Arctic Climate Issues 2011: Changes in Arctic Snow, Water, Ice and Permafrost* (Oslo, Norway: 2012).

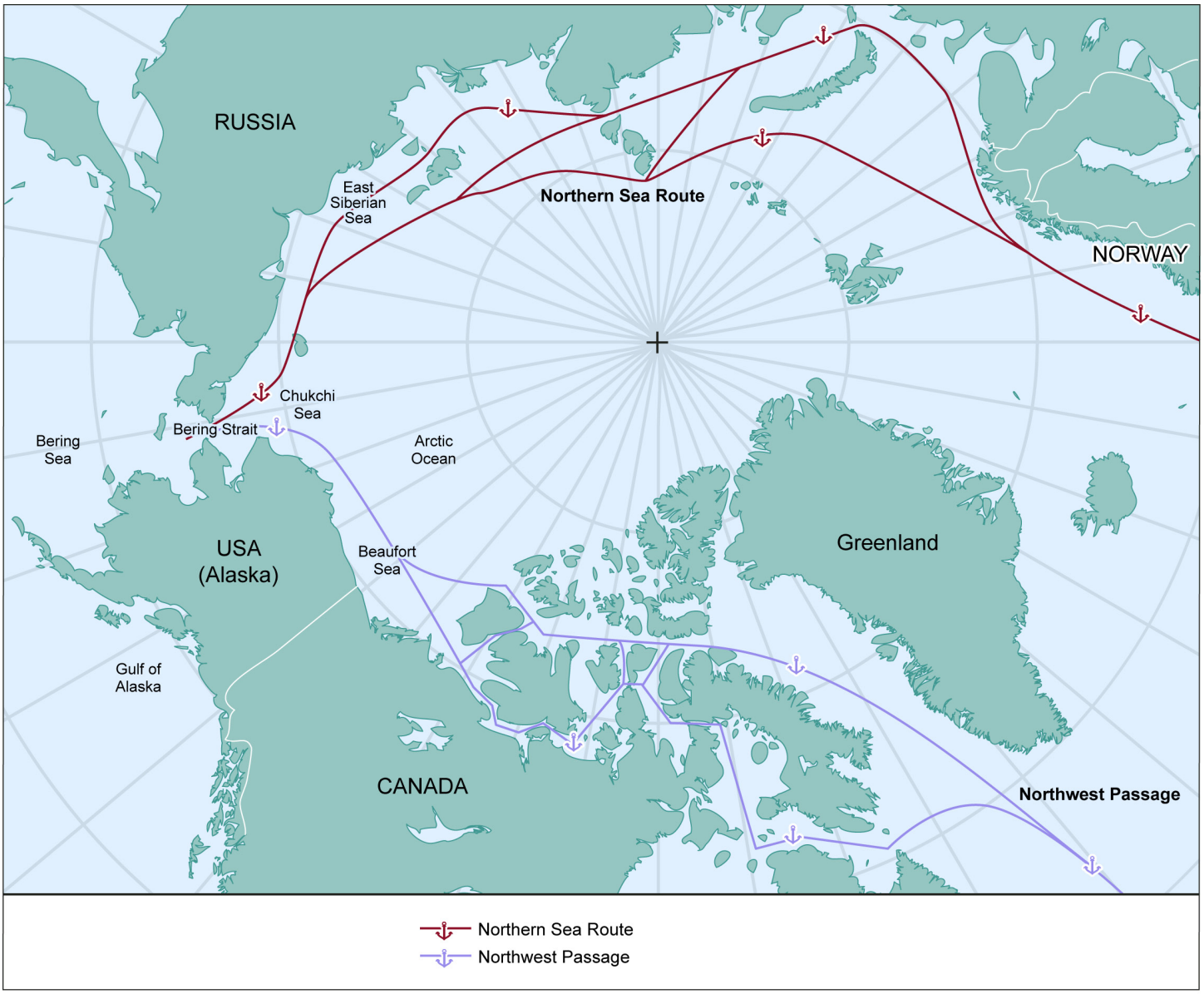
[24]Arctic Council Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, *Arctic Pollution 2009* (Oslo: 2009); Arctic Council Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, *AMAP Assessment 2011: Mercury in the Arctic* (Oslo: 2011). Persistent organic pollutants and mercury are toxic chemicals that can accumulate in the environment and contaminate food sources.

[25]We have ongoing work related to effects of ocean acidification and related federal actions.

Congressional Research Service report, a decrease in sea ice coverage leads to a more accessible Arctic, presenting potential opportunities to expand economic activities in the region. For example, the interagency Arctic management report stated that diminishing Arctic sea ice will likely encourage growth of commercial shipping via international trans-Arctic sea routes, even though the timing of such expansion remains unclear. As shown in figure 2, these routes include the Northwest Passage that follows the northern coasts of Alaska and Canada, connecting the east coasts of North America and Asia, and the Northern Sea Route that follows the northern border of Russia, connecting Asia and Europe.[26]

[26]For more information regarding Arctic shipping, refer to GAO-14-299.

Figure 2: Trans-Arctic Sea Routes



Sources: Office of Naval Intelligence; GAO; and Map Resources (map).

Another economic opportunity arising from a more accessible Arctic includes potential development of the region's mineral, oil, and gas resources. However, the economic factors and technical challenges of operating in the Arctic environment will also affect the growth of such

development, according to Department of the Interior officials and the 2014 Congressional Research Service report.

A more accessible Arctic presents economic opportunities, but such activities can lead to negative impacts. For example, as we previously reported, increases in commercial activities could increase the risk of ship collisions or oil spills, and potentially increase demand for services such as search and rescue and other maritime navigation support.[27] Furthermore, according to a 2011 Council report, increased shipping along with other human activities such as the use of diesel vehicles and residential heating can contribute to emissions of black carbon—a so called short-lived climate forcer—which can warm the climate.[28]

The Arctic Council Is a Voluntary Intergovernmental Forum for Arctic States, with the Involvement of Others, to Address Environmental and Economic Development Issues

The Council is a voluntary intergovernmental forum for the eight Arctic States, with the involvement of indigenous organizations and other stakeholders, to address environmental and economic development issues through various projects and reports.[29] Arctic States, indigenous organizations, and others serve in various roles and cooperate and coordinate through numerous Council meetings to discuss and conduct work. The Council conducts a variety of projects including scientific assessments, reports, guidance, and regional and pan-Arctic initiatives. Arctic States, indigenous organizations, and others provide financial and in-kind contributions to carry out these projects, and the Council has expanded and broadened its work to address emerging issues.

[27]GAO-14-299.

[28]Arctic Council Task Force on Short-Lived Climate Forcers, *Progress Report and Recommendations for Ministers* (2011). Black carbon, which is soot, can warm the climate by darkening the snow and ice and absorbing sunlight, which leads to further warming and melting. Other short-lived climate forcers include ozone and methane, among other things.

[29]Throughout this report, we use the term indigenous to describe the communities of people that have historically resided in the Arctic. We use the term Alaska Natives to refer to the indigenous people who reside in Alaska.

Arctic States and Others Serve in Various Council Roles

Arctic States serve as the members of the Council and make decisions by consensus among themselves. The Arctic States set the priorities for the Council, make decisions on Council matters, coordinate the Council's meetings, perform administrative functions, and finance the Council's work on a voluntary basis. Foreign ministers from Arctic states typically serve as Arctic Ministers and high-level staff from foreign ministries typically serve as Senior Arctic Officials (SAO). Staff from various agencies and ministries within Arctic State governments serve as members of the six working groups that perform the majority of the Council's technical and scientific work.

Certain Arctic indigenous organizations serve as Permanent Participants in the Council. The Ottawa Declaration named three Arctic indigenous organizations as Permanent Participants and opened such status to other Arctic indigenous organizations that met specified criteria.[30] Permanent Participants have the opportunity to participate in all Council meetings and provide input to reports and other projects but the Arctic States make Council decisions by consensus.[31] Six Permanent Participants currently represent indigenous organizations across the Arctic, and four of the six Permanent Participant organizations represent Alaska Natives (see fig. 3).

[30]Specifically, the Council opens Permanent Participant status to other Arctic organizations of indigenous people with majority Arctic indigenous constituency that represent either an Arctic indigenous group in more than one Arctic state or represent multiple indigenous groups in one Arctic state. The declaration further states that the number of Permanent Participant groups at any time should be less than the number of Arctic Council member states.

[31]The six Permanent Participant Groups to the Arctic Council include: the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Arctic Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council. Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, and Inuit Circumpolar Council represent Alaska Natives.

Figure 3: Permanent Participant Organizations of the Arctic Council

Source: Compiled by W.K. Dallman © Norwegian Polar Institute.

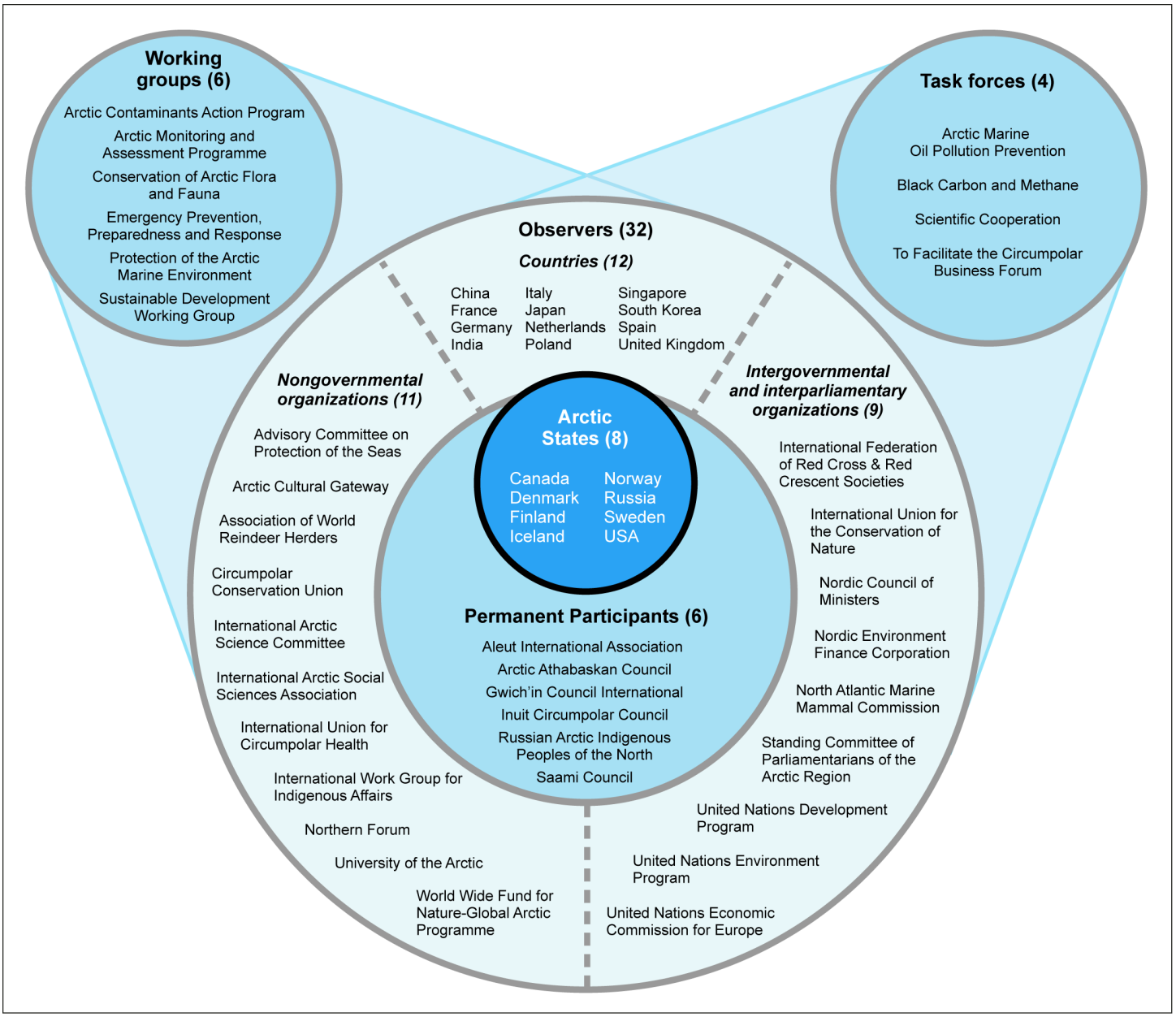
The Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat provides some assistance to the Permanent Participants.[32] This Secretariat collects and communicates information about Council activities and decisions and disseminates it to the Permanent Participants.

In addition, under the Ottawa Declaration, non-Arctic states; intergovernmental, interparliamentary, global and regional organizations; and nongovernmental organizations may apply for "Observer" status. The Arctic States grant Observer status to these parties through consensus. Observer organization representatives may attend Council meetings and can actively participate in the Council's working groups and projects but Arctic States make Council decisions by consensus. As of April 2014, the states had granted 32 organizations and non-Arctic states Observer status: 12 non-Arctic states, 9 intergovernmental organizations, and 11 nongovernment organizations. Guest organizations can also attend meetings at the discretion of the chair and can contribute to certain Council work.

The Council has six permanent working groups composed of Arctic State representatives that cover a broad range of issues such as emergency response, protection of the Arctic marine environment, and the conservation of Arctic flora and fauna. In addition to the working groups, the Council can establish task forces and expert groups, also composed of Arctic State representatives, for a limited period to address a specific issue. Figure 4 identifies the Council members, Permanent Participants, Observers, working groups, and active task forces as of April 2014.

[32]For more information regarding the Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, visit its website: http://www.arcticpeoples.org/.

Figure 4: Arctic Council Organizational Structure as of April 2014



Source: GAO analysis of Arctic Council information.

Arctic States and Others Cooperate and Coordinate through Numerous Arctic Council Meetings

Council participants cooperate and coordinate through numerous meetings including: (1) ministerial meetings; (2) meetings of SAOs; and (3) working group, task force, and expert group meetings.

Ministerial meetings. Arctic Ministers meet biennially to set the Council agenda for the coming 2 years.[33] The foreign ministers of the eight Arctic States typically serve as the Arctic Ministers.[34] According to senior State officials, the U.S. Secretary of State serves as the U.S. Arctic Minister during the 2-year chairmanship and presides over the biennial Council ministerial meeting at the chairmanship's conclusion. At the ministerial meetings, the Council chair typically proposes the priorities and projects for its chairmanship. For example, during the last Council ministerial meeting held in Kiruna, Sweden, in May 2013, Canada—which assumed the chairmanship in 2013—announced that the Council would focus on "Development for the People of the North" during the next 2 years. Canada proposed projects focused on responsible resource development, safe shipping, and sustainable circumpolar communities, among other things. Arctic Ministers may also set Council priorities, direct the SAOs and working groups to initiate new projects, establish new task forces, change the Council structure, approve new Permanent Participant or Observer groups, and endorse Council reports and other projects. To document decisions, highlight the accomplishments achieved over the past 2 years, and formally announce the priorities the Council will address for the next 2 years, the Arctic Ministers issue a ministerial declaration at the conclusion of each ministerial meeting.

SAO Meetings. SAOs meet biannually to review and approve ongoing Council work. SAOs are government officials selected by the Arctic States who manage day-to-day Council activities. Most of the Arctic States designate an Arctic Ambassador to serve as their SAO, but the United States and Canada do not currently have Arctic Ambassadors.[35] A senior

[33]Arctic States permit Permanent Participants and Observers to attend the biennial ministerial meetings.

[34]Other ministers may serve as the Arctic Minister for an Arctic State. For example, Canada's Environment Minister leads the 2013-2015 Canadian chairmanship of the Arctic Council.

[35]In February 2014, State announced that it will name a special high-level representative to the Council tasked with advancing U.S. Arctic interests in preparation for the U.S. chairmanship of the Council beginning in May 2015.

State official serves as the U.S. SAO. During SAO meetings, SAOs review the ongoing work and approve reports from the Council working groups, task forces, and expert groups to forward to the Arctic Ministers. Arctic States or Permanent Participants may also propose new projects at these meetings, and the SAOs decide which proposals to submit to the Arctic Ministers for approval.

Working group, task force, and expert group meetings. The Council's work takes place in the working groups, task forces, and expert groups that the Arctic States chair on a rotating basis. As such, the meetings occur in locations that span the eight Arctic States. The working groups meet biannually and the task forces and expert groups meet at times decided by the participating Arctic States. Each Arctic State selects a number of experts from government agencies to comprise a national delegation for each of the six working groups. Permanent Participants may also serve as members of a Council working group and Observers may participate in the work. Working group members carry out scientific assessments, draft reports and recommendations, and work on other Council projects as directed by the Arctic States. Each working group may establish operating guidelines and work plans. Arctic Ministers and SAOs review and approve the work plans and any revisions made to the operating guidelines for each working group.

Arctic States and Others Conduct Projects Funded through Voluntary and In-Kind Contributions

According to federal agency officials, Permanent Participant representatives, and other Arctic stakeholders, projects conducted by the Council have played a major role in advancing the global understanding of environmental and sustainable development issues in the Arctic, and enabled Council participants to discuss possible actions to address them. These projects include scientific assessments, guidelines, recommendations, best practices, and other initiatives. Some key Council assessments and guidance include the following:

- *The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment,* 2004: The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment describes ongoing impacts of climate change in the Arctic and their consequences such as rising temperatures; loss of sea ice; unprecedented melting of the Greenland ice sheet; and many impacts on ecosystems, animals, and people.[36] This assessment was the first comprehensively researched, fully referenced, and

[36]Arctic Council, *Impacts of a Warming Arctic: Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: October 15, 2004).

independently reviewed evaluation of climate change and impacts in the Arctic.

- *The Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment,* 2009: The Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment is the first comprehensive analysis of current and potential future Arctic shipping activity.[37] It provides 17 recommendations, which are still being implemented, related to enhancing Arctic marine safety, protecting Arctic people and the environment, and building Arctic marine infrastructure.
- *Community Based Monitoring Handbook,* 2010: Federal officials described this *Handbook* as the best manual available for researchers to use when interacting with local communities in the Arctic.[38] In particular, they said that the handbook's positive examples of engaging with indigenous communities helped guide many researchers that may have had limited previous contact with indigenous communities.

In addition to assessments and guidance, the Council has undertaken regional and pan-Arctic initiatives that produced concrete deliverables and, in some cases, led to measurable outcomes. For example, the Arctic Contaminants Action Program project on obsolete pesticides began in 2001 to reduce environmental releases of outdated pesticides found in 11 Northern territories of Russia. Through this project, working group members report they have inventoried, repackaged, and stored nearly 7,000 tons of outdated pesticides.[39] In another example, the Arctic Maritime and Aviation Transportation Infrastructure Initiative carried out by the Sustainable Development Working Group developed a Web-based searchable map of Arctic infrastructure to better identify capacity and capability needs for future infrastructure development.[40]

[37]Arctic Council, *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment 2009 Report* (Tromsø, Norway: April, 2009).

[38]Victoria Gofman, *Community-Based Monitoring Handbook: Lessons from the Arctic and Beyond*, Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna, CBMP Report No.21 (Akureyri, Iceland: August, 2010).

[39]For additional information regarding the Arctic Contaminants Action Program's project on obsolete pesticides, see: http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/acap-home/acap-psgs/obsolete-pesticides.

[40]For additional information regarding the Arctic Maritime and Aviation Transportation Infrastructure Initiative, see: http://www.arcticinfrastructure.org.

The Council does not have a central source of funding for projects, and all funding is voluntary. Specifically, each working group relies on its own mechanisms to fund projects. State officials said that Arctic States provide nearly all funding and in-kind contributions. The officials also said that Permanent Participants sometimes provide small amounts of funding, but their contributions to the Council's work are almost entirely in-kind. Financial support from Observers cannot exceed that of the Arctic States, unless the SAOs decide otherwise by consensus. In addition, some working groups seek supplemental financing from international financial institutions to carry out some projects. According to some Council stakeholders, working groups may compete for project funding because different working groups might simultaneously have several applications for financing under review at the same international financial institution without any coordination. This arrangement places responsibility for the prioritization of projects in the hands of these external institutions rather than with the Council itself. Some federal agency officials also said that the voluntary funding structure makes the working groups and their projects vulnerable to political forces because Arctic States fund projects that reflect their own priorities. Further, federal officials said that these projects may not always reflect Council priorities and that the projects undertaken may not always be the most important or the most strategic.

The Arctic Council Has Expanded and Broadened Its Work to Address Emerging Issues

As the opportunities and challenges facing the Arctic have grown in volume and complexity, the Council has increased its workload and created new task forces to address emerging issues. According to federal officials, when the Council was established in 1996, it had about 30 ongoing projects. Over the years, that number has increased, and State officials now estimate that the Council has about 80 ongoing projects. In addition, the Council has created a number of task forces to supplement the work of the working groups. The first task force was initiated at the 2009 Norwegian Ministerial meeting to negotiate a search and rescue agreement that was delivered at the 2011 Danish Ministerial meeting. The Council currently has a total of four task forces to address emerging issues during the 2013 to 2015 Canadian chairmanship. Some federal officials said that task forces address specific cross-cutting issues that require high-level discussion from decision makers. Two task forces, one during the Danish chairmanship from 2009 to 2011 and one during the Swedish chairmanship from 2011 to 2013, resulted in two multilateral agreements among the eight Arctic States. However, according to federal officials, the expanded use of task forces sometimes pulls experts away from the core working groups. Further, one official said that if these task forces respond to new priority issues, the Council may want to revisit the

structure and scope of the existing working groups and incorporate the emerging issues into the mandate of the working groups.

The Canadian chairmanship has further broadened the Council's work to address emerging issues. For example, Canada's plan for its chairmanship includes facilitating the creation of a business forum to foster sustainable economic development in the Arctic and provide opportunities for businesses to engage with the Council.[41] Some stakeholders said that, prior to this initiative, the Council did not have mechanisms to involve industry and businesses, but some industry and business experts participate on a meeting- or project-specific basis. According to an Arctic stakeholder, business and industry have an interest in Council activities because the discussions and decisions made at the Council can directly affect their work. Moreover, stakeholders said that industry and business representatives provide valuable knowledge, expertise, and equipment for oil spill and other emergency prevention, preparedness, and response.

As the Council's workload has expanded, the Council has facilitated and integrated its operations. For example, to enhance administrative support and continuity of its operations, the Council established a small, voluntarily funded administrative Secretariat in Tromsø, Norway, in January 2013. Prior to this development, the Arctic State holding the chairmanship performed the Secretariat functions. The Secretariat, which had a staff of seven at the time of our review, maintains and updates the Council's website; provides a repository for information; and facilitates information sharing among the Council working groups, task forces, and expert groups. Federal officials said that the Secretariat will enhance the institutional memory of the Council, increase information sharing, help organize activities across the working groups, and make the work of the Council more manageable and transparent. Some Arctic stakeholders said that the Secretariat will also help strengthen relationships with other organizations by providing up-to-date information regarding the Council's projects.

[41]On March 26, 2014, the Arctic Council issued a statement announcing that SAOs agreed to move forward with the creation of the forum now referred to as the Arctic Economic Council. According to the statement, the Arctic Economic Council will be able to put forward proposals and reports to help inform the work of the Arctic Council.

In addition, federal officials said that the Council has adopted measures aimed at increasing communication and cooperation among the various Council working groups. For example, the Council encourages representatives from working groups to attend one another's meetings. Federal officials said that in early years of the Council, the Council working groups operated independently with little interaction. According to some Arctic stakeholders, this limited communication led to some competition for projects among the Council working groups. In addition, the Council issued a strategy in 2012 to improve internal communication, facilitate cooperation, and avoid overlap in Council work. Among other things, the strategy recommends that working groups prepare 2-page summaries following all meetings and distribute the summaries to the SAOs, Secretariat, working groups, and chairmanship to quickly inform them of meeting outcomes.

Six Key U.S. Agencies Participate in the Council with Leadership Roles and Face Challenges by Not Having a Clear Direction or Specific Resources for the Work

Six federal agencies with leadership roles participate in the Council mainly by heading U.S. delegations to working groups and face challenges in doing so. Other federal agencies participate in Council working groups and lead U.S. participation in some task forces. Numerous agencies with Arctic interests collaborate through an informal interagency group to conduct Council work but face challenges because of not having a clear direction and specific resources for their participation in the Council. Finally, some mechanisms exist to consider Alaska's and Alaska Natives' interests in federal agencies' Council work, but agencies face additional challenges considering these interests.

Six Key Agencies Hold Leadership Roles in the Council, and Other Agencies Participate Through Working Groups and Task Forces

Six key agencies hold leadership roles as head of the U.S. delegations to the Council's working groups, and other agencies lead the U.S. efforts on Council task forces (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: U.S. Agency Leads for Arctic Council Working Groups and Task Forces as of March 2014

Source: Department of State.

As one of the six key agencies, State leads federal agency efforts and participates in the Council in several capacities. For example, in addition to the Secretary of State's role as the U.S. Arctic Minister, State leads the U.S. chairmanship of the Council, which first occurred from 1998 to 2000 and will occur again in 2015.[42] A State official also serves as the U.S. SAO and leads U.S. participation in the Sustainable Development Working Group. State officials said they consult with federal agencies to select U.S. heads of delegation and U.S. representatives to the Council's working groups and task forces. For example, State asked USGCRP to head the U.S. delegation to the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme working group and EPA to co-chair a task force on Short-Lived Climate Forcers with Norway and Sweden that produced a report on black carbon, among other products.[43] Some of these agencies provide varying amounts of funding to the working groups and task forces in which they participate.[44]

In addition to agencies with leadership roles, at least 15 agencies with Arctic interests participate in the Council's working groups and task forces (see app. IV for a list of agencies participating in working groups and task forces as of January 2014). For example, a BOEM official participates in the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme working group's effort to produce a three-volume oil and gas assessment, which discusses the potential effects of oil and gas activities in the Arctic. Furthermore, Coast Guard officials said they formerly served as the head of the U.S. delegations for the Task Forces on Search and Rescue and on Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response, and authored various chapters of the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment.

[42]Prior to 2011, the United States Ministerial Representative was a lower-level State official. For example, the Deputy Secretary of State attended the 2009 ministerial meeting and the Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs attended the 2006 ministerial meeting.

[43]The task force was established in the Tromsø Declaration at the Sixth Arctic Council's biennial ministerial meeting in April 2009 and, according to EPA officials, concluded its work in May 2013.

[44]For example, according to a NOAA official, the agency annually provides $20,000 to the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment working group and FWS officials said the agency contributes $30,000 annually to the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group.

Most officials we interviewed from key agencies said their participation in the Council enhances their ability to leverage resources, fulfill their missions, learn best practices, or further develop relations with other Arctic States. For example, an FWS official said the work of the Council enables the agency to leverage resources to accomplish Council projects that align with its mission, and provides access to other Arctic States with common interests. In addition, a NOAA official said the Council helps the agency build partnerships that have provided opportunities crucial for conducting its work, such as obtaining access to other countries' exclusive economic zones to conduct scientific research.[45] A Coast Guard official said the participation in the Council facilitated valuable interactions with international partners to sponsor research, identify best practices, and support development of shipping standards at the IMO and other standards bodies. Coast Guard officials also said working through the Council particularly enhanced bi-lateral relations with Russian and Canadian officials, supporting related initiatives outside the Council such as updating joint contingency plans between the United States and Canada to manage a cross-border oil spill, among other things.

Agencies Collaborate on Arctic Council Work and Face Challenges by Not Having a Clear Direction or Specific Resources for the Work

Within the United States, federal agency officials who participate in the Council collaborate primarily through the Arctic Policy Group, an informal interagency group led by State but is not part of the Council itself. According to State officials, this group discusses Council issues and shares Arctic-related information, among other things.[46] State convenes the group monthly and uses it to circulate information and identify agency officials to work on Council projects. According to a National Security Decision Memorandum and State officials, the Arctic Policy Group oversees implementation of U.S. Arctic policy but does not make policy decisions. As of December 2013, this group consisted of officials from at least 39 federal agencies and the state of Alaska Governor's and Lieutenant Governor's offices (see app. V for a list of agencies participating in the group). In addition to the Arctic Policy Group, EPA

[45]Under UNCLOS, coastal states have the right to regulate and authorize marine scientific research in their exclusive economic zone and on their continental shelf in accordance with the treaty. A coastal state's exclusive economic zone is the area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea and extends no more than 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea baseline.

[46]In1971, President Nixon directed in National Security Decision Memorandum 144 that an Interagency Arctic Policy Group be established, chaired by State.

officials said the six U.S. heads of delegation collaborate through informal meetings, which generally occur quarterly and involve discussion of current Council work and priorities.

Several agency officials we spoke with said that the Arctic Policy Group helps them collaborate on Council work, but some officials said agencies face challenges participating on the Council. First, some key agency officials and Arctic stakeholders said collaborating agencies face a key challenge by not having a clear direction to guide and align their Council work. Specifically, some agency officials and these stakeholders said that the six agencies have not developed a strategy that guides agency collaboration for Council participation and aligns the agencies' work. For example, a USGCRP official said, aside from State's overall role as the lead U.S. agency, other federal agencies have limited ability to influence one another and have no strategy to guide their Council work. The U.S. government and various agencies have Arctic strategies, but these documents do not articulate an overall approach for agencies to follow in Council participation. State officials said these strategies do not guide agency participation in Council activities instead, they reflect work conducted in the Council.

In the absence of clear direction that helps align collaborating agencies' Council work, some stakeholders said the United States faces challenges prioritizing the work and delivering unified messages to other Arctic States. For example, an NNSA official said that U.S. agencies do not have a strategy applied across the agencies, but agency officials discuss and agree upon projects within the Arctic Policy Group as they arise. In addition, one stakeholder who participated in the Council said different agencies have delivered inconsistent messages when providing comments on various working group reports. The stakeholder said at times agency officials provide comments on reports but do not do so in an official capacity. The stakeholder also said that establishing Council priorities could unify U.S. agencies' voices.

In addition to not having a clear direction for Council participation, officials from most of the six key agencies said they face challenges sustaining their collaborative Council efforts because they do not have specific resources for their Council work. In particular, agency officials said federal funding and staff time for Council activities come from general program budgets, which creates challenges when Council work must compete with other agency priorities for funding. For example, NOAA officials said their agency focuses mainly on domestic issues, which limits funding for international activities such as Council work even though this work relates

to NOAA's mission. State officials also said the United States does not have specific funding for Council work because it had not formerly prioritized Council participation. In addition, agency officials said they do not identify their in-kind time spent on Council activities, primarily because of challenges differentiating Council tasks from their other duties.

Some agency officials said that without specified resources for their Council work, they face challenges implementing agreed-upon actions and committing to Council activities. For example, EPA officials said the absence of funding specific to Council projects limits their ability to participate. In particular, EPA officials said Council ministers approved projects on mercury contamination, but these projects had not occurred at the time of our review because of limited funding from Arctic States, including the United States. In another case, according to a FWS official, the FWS official who leads the U.S. delegation for the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group was not able to attend in-person two working group meetings in 2012 and 2013, although FWS officials attended these meetings in previous years.[47] Some stakeholders said inconsistent U.S. participation concerns other Arctic States, which may cause some loss of U.S. influence in the Council. Furthermore, State officials said the absence of specified funding for Council work makes it challenging to manage the increased workload. For example, State officials said the agency had two full-time employees dedicated to Council work, as of February 2014. Various agency officials and stakeholders said that State does not have enough staff necessary to carry out the agency's increasing Council responsibilities. State officials said they hoped to identify additional funding for staff dedicated to Council work and were developing a plan at the time of our review to identify their anticipated staff needs for the U.S. chairmanship in 2015.

State officials said that developing a Council strategy, in collaboration with other agencies that participate in Council activities, which outlines a clear direction for participation and identifies resources might help sustain the collaborative effort to address these challenges and support the United States' role as chair in 2015. We previously reported on key practices for enhancing and sustaining collaboration among federal

[47]According to an FWS official, the FWS delegation lead participated in the meetings by phone.

agencies.[48] These practices include collaborating agencies (1) establishing mutually reinforcing or joint strategies to help align activities and resources for the collaborative effort and (2) identifying and addressing needs by leveraging resources, which entails, among other things, identifying human and financial resources needed to initiate or sustain a collaborative effort. Without engaging in these practices, the collaborating agencies that hold leadership roles may continue to face challenges prioritizing the work, delivering unified messages, and consistently participating in the Council.

Agencies Consider Alaska's and Alaska Natives' Interests in Their Arctic Council Work, but Challenges Exist with These Efforts

Key federal agency officials we spoke with said they consider the state of Alaska and Alaska Natives' interests though various mechanisms, including the Council and the Alaska Arctic Council ad hoc working group, but they said challenges exist in doing so. In addition, key documents articulate the federal government's intent to consider the interests of Arctic stakeholders. For example, the 2013 *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* includes fostering partnerships with the state of Alaska and consulting and coordinating with Alaska Natives and a 2013 interagency report to the President prioritizes partnering with them to implement the national strategy.[49] However, officials from the state of Alaska and some Alaska Natives we spoke with had concerns about the extent to which federal agencies and their Permanent Participant representatives view them as partners and consider their interests since the United States is an Arctic nation because of Alaska.

[48]GAO, *Results Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration Among Federal Agencies*, GAO-06-15 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005). Other key practices we identified that can enhance and sustain interagency collaboration are to define and articulate a common outcome; agree on roles and responsibilities; establish compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries; develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report on the results; reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts; and reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts. Additional discussion on interagency collaboration mechanisms can be found in GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, GAO-12-1022 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012) and GAO, *Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups*, GAO-14-220 (Washington, D.C.: Feb.14, 2014).

[49]The White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2013); J.P. Clement, J.L. Bengston, and B.P. Kelly, Interagency Working Group on Coordination of Domestic Energy Development and Permitting in Alaska (D.J. Hayes, Chair), *Managing for the Future in a Rapidly Changing Arctic: A report to the President* (Washington, D.C.: March 2013).

Regarding the state of Alaska, federal agency officials that we interviewed mainly consider its interests in their Council work through the Arctic Policy Group, direct interactions on the U.S. delegation to the Council, and the Alaska Arctic Council ad hoc working group consisting of interested parties in Alaska. Most of the key federal agency and state of Alaska officials we interviewed said the Arctic Policy Group is the primary mechanism for considering the state of Alaska's interests. An Alaska official cited the Arctic Policy Group as a helpful way to incorporate input from the Alaska region. For example, in February 2012, an Alaska state official presented the Arctic Policy Group with a state legislative-led task force's efforts to identify opportunities for addressing the economic and environmental effects of diminishing sea ice on Alaska, according to State officials.[50]

In addition, state of Alaska officials said they work directly with federal agencies by participating in Council working groups and projects. For example, regarding the upcoming U.S. chairmanship of the Council, Alaska officials sent State a list of four priority themes the state of Alaska would like considered when the United States assumes the chair in 2015, such as creating jobs and economic opportunities for Arctic residents and ensuring safe, secure, and reliable shipping.[51] In addition, state of Alaska officials said they participated on the Council's Task Force on Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response and the Arctic Maritime and Aviation Transportation Infrastructure Initiative.[52] Finally, Alaska officials said they also host a bimonthly Alaska Arctic Council ad hoc

[50]In 2010, the Alaska State Legislature established the Alaska Northern Waters Task Force to identify opportunities to increase the state's engagement on issues associated with diminishing sea ice and associated economic and environmental affects. The task force included state legislators, leaders from Alaskan communities, and representatives of key state and federal agencies. The task force produced a report in January 2012, which included findings and recommendations.

[51]Alaska officials said additional priorities include preventing suicides and developing safe and sustainable sanitation facilities for smaller, isolated Arctic communities. In addition, in early 2014, both houses of the Alaska State Legislature approved a resolution urging State to consider Alaska's priorities when it chairs the Council and work in partnership with state officials to appoint a Council chair.

[52]According to the Institute of the North, a nongovernmental organization that aims to inform public policy and engage citizens, the Arctic Maritime and Aviation Transportation Infrastructure Initiative seeks to evaluate northern infrastructure ports, airports, and response capability by inventorying maritime and aviation assets in the Arctic. A multinational steering committee composed of government, academic, and private sector entities leads the initiative.

working group teleconference, which involves coordination with State officials, Alaska-based Permanent Participants, the Alaska Congressional Delegation, and others to facilitate communication on Council issues.

Alaska state officials we spoke with said they faced three main challenges while working with the federal agencies to have them consider the state's interests in the agencies' Council work. First, Alaska officials said the state's Arctic priorities sometimes differ from those of the federal agencies, making it challenging for the state to have its perspectives incorporated into agencies' Council work. For example, Alaska officials said they tried to have their interests reflected in a report by the Council's Ecosystem Based Management expert group, but could not do so because the U.S. delegation working on the report had different priorities than the state of Alaska. Second, state of Alaska officials said State does not provide enough information on the process used to make policy decisions regarding the Council. Without this information, Alaska state officials said it is difficult to know which federal agency they should contact to provide their input and when to do so. In particular, Alaska officials said that federal agencies leading U.S. participation in Council working groups have a considerable amount of autonomy to direct participation and ability to affect project outcomes, which may not align with Alaska's priorities.[53] Third, Alaska officials said the state had limited resources to engage with the federal agencies and participate in Council projects. Because of limited information on the process used for federal decision making regarding the Council and resources for Alaska's participation, Alaska state officials said they could not participate as fully as desired to ensure that the Council addresses their interests. Overall, an Alaska state official said that increasing collaboration between the state and federal government would help address some of these challenges.

With respect to incorporating the perspectives of Alaska Natives, some federal agency officials leading U.S. participation in the Council said they consider Alaska Natives' interests through engagement with the four Permanent Participant groups that represent Alaska Natives. For example, State officials said they primarily consult with Permanent

[53]At the time of our review, the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission was finalizing a report to outline the state of Alaska's overarching Arctic priorities. Alaska Arctic Policy Commission, *Preliminary Report to the Alaska State Legislature* (Anchorage and Bethel, Alaska: submitted Jan. 30, 2014).

Participant representatives prior to SAO meetings on an as-needed basis to discuss items on upcoming meeting agendas. Officials from other agencies said they work with the Permanent Participant representatives during Council meetings. For example, a USGCRP official said he engages with the Inuit Circumpolar Council through the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme working group.[54] In addition, a Permanent Participant representative said his group regularly talks with the U.S. head of delegation to the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group, an FWS official based in Alaska. However, this Permanent Participant representative said he interacts less frequently with federal officials located outside of Alaska, such as the U.S. head of delegation to the Sustainable Development Working Group, a State official based in Washington, D.C.

Various agencies and Alaska-based Permanent Participant representatives we spoke with said Permanent Participants' limited financial resources and number of staff for Council participation created challenges when considering Alaska Native interests in agencies' Council work. One Permanent Participant representative said over the years, increases in the number of Council activities, projects, and task forces in turn increased the burden on the Permanent Participants, particularly for travel to meetings. To help address these issues, State provides annual travel funding to the four Alaska-based Permanent Participant groups.[55] Without State funding, the groups would have a more difficult time maintaining their Council participation, according to a Permanent Participant representative. In addition to travel challenges, the increasing number of Council projects challenges Permanent Participants' capacity to keep up with the workload. For example, a former Permanent Participant representative said that effective involvement requires participation in activities taking place between SAO meetings, such as spending time reviewing draft documents. This can pose challenges for some Permanent Participants because of a limited number of staff.

[54]This working group addresses the environmental consequences and biological effects in the Arctic resulting from climate change, among other issues.

[55]For example, in 2012, an Aleut International Association representative said State provided $75,000 and, in 2013, it provided $55,000. Not all Permanent Participants use this funding. For example, Gwich'in Council International has not used this funding in recent years mainly because of limited number of staff, according to a Permanent Participant representative.

Specifically, some of the Alaska-based Permanent Participant groups have no permanent staff, and others have only two to three staff.

Our site visits to Alaska Native villages reinforced some of these challenges. Alaska Natives we interviewed from Barrow, Kivalina, Kotzebue, and Wainwright said some of their primary environmental and economic interests included the following:

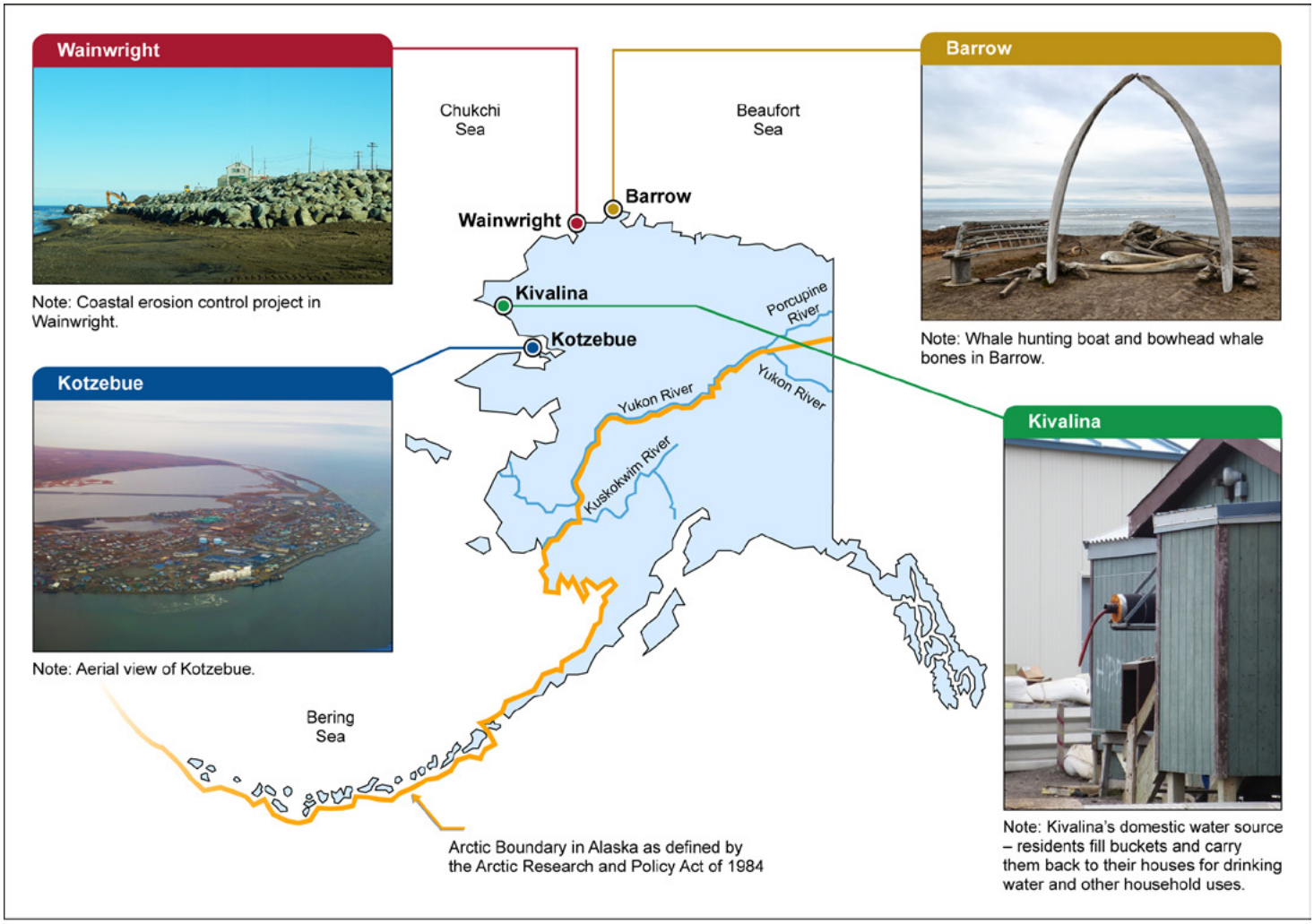
- ensuring sustainable economic development;
- preventing pollution from oil spills and other hazardous materials;
- reducing the effects of increased shipping traffic on the wildlife they hunt and rely on for food, such as whale, caribou, walrus, seal, and salmon;
- addressing the adverse effects of climate change, such as sea ice retreat and coastal erosion;
- reducing the effects of rising fuel prices; and
- preparing for increased visitors from cruise ships and any related incidents.

One community leader said oil and gas development would provide jobs and address infrastructure gaps, but he would like this development conducted responsibly. Other community leaders said the changes in the climate, such as declining sea ice, make it more difficult for Alaska Natives to hunt the animals they primarily rely on for food and require some villages to construct sea walls or relocate due to rising seas and coastal erosion.[56] See figure 6, an interactive graphic, for information on each site visit location (see app. VI for the full text of this graphic).

[56]We reported in 2009 that coastal erosion from rising temperatures and thawing permafrost has posed imminent threats to 31 Alaska villages, many of which have decided to relocate or explore relocation options (GAO-09-551).

Interactive Graphic **Figure 6: Arctic Alaska Site Visits**

Instructions: **Move your cursor over any of the photos below to read information about the associated site. For a noninteractive version of this information, see appendix VI.**



Sources: Department of the Interior; GAO (analysis and photos); U.S. Census Bureau; Cities of Barrow and Kotzebue; Government of Canada; Maniilaq Association; Map Resources (map); NANA Regional Corporation; North Slope and Northwest Arctic Boroughs; State of Alaska.

Regarding representation of Alaska Native interests by the Permanent Participant groups, some Alaska Native community leaders we interviewed said they coordinate with their representative, and others expressed concern that their Permanent Participant group did not adequately represent them. For example, some Alaska Native community leaders said their Permanent Participant representative visited and worked with their community in various capacities, such as on a Council food security project. However, another Alaska Native community leader said the Permanent Participants represented too broad of a population, and he would like to have a Permanent Participant representative from his borough—a unit of government similar to a county. This community leader also said a Permanent Participant representative had never visited the community. Other Alaska Native community leaders we spoke with said they were not aware of the Council or how it represented their interests.

Agencies Have Acted on Some Arctic Council Voluntary Recommendations but State Does Not Track Actions and Faces Challenges Implementing Them

Federal agencies have taken various actions on some voluntary recommendations that the United States and other Arctic States have adopted through the Council, but State does not have a process to review and track progress made on these actions and faces challenges implementing them. The United States endorses actions to address Arctic issues by adopting voluntary recommendations approved in nonbinding ministerial declarations and, more recently, signing two formal multilateral agreements that address specific high-priority issues.[57] State relies on other agencies to act on the recommendations, but the agency does not review or track their overall implementation. According to State officials and other stakeholders, the recommendations provide a mechanism to strengthen the Council's ability to address Arctic issues, but the United States—with State as the lead agency—and other Arctic States face challenges implementing them.

[57]In addition to the recommendations made to the Arctic States, the Council makes recommendations to Council bodies, such as the working groups, and other stakeholders, such as the scientific community. This report focuses on the recommendations the Council makes to the Arctic States.

The United States Endorses Actions to Address Arctic Issues through Voluntary Recommendations and Formal Agreements and Has Taken Some Related Actions

The United States and other Arctic States adopt voluntary recommendations that the Council makes in nonbinding biennial ministerial declarations, which Arctic States negotiate and approve by consensus. We analyzed the eight Council declarations issued from 1998 to 2013 and consulted with State officials to identify statements in the declarations that State considers as recommendations to Arctic States. In total, State officials identified 39 recommendations in the declarations that spanned many Arctic issues addressed in the Council including the marine environment, biodiversity, climate change, environmental protection, emergency prevention, and human health and development (see app. VII for the list of recommendations that State officials identified). In general, the recommendations either identified broad actions associated with various Arctic issues or endorsed numerous recommendations made in reports and assessments produced by working groups and task forces.[58]

State relies on other agencies to act on the recommendations, and agencies have taken some actions in response. For example, several U.S. agencies have actively contributed to a monitoring initiative endorsed in the 2006 Salekhard Declaration.[59] Specifically, the declaration encouraged the Arctic States to contribute to the Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program, an international network of scientists, governments, indigenous organizations, and conservation groups working to integrate efforts to monitor the Arctic's living resources. In response, U.S. agencies have contributed to the program through the Bureau of Land Management co-chairing the effort with the North Slope Science Initiative, an intergovernmental effort to improve collection and dissemination of ecosystem information in the U.S. Arctic, and the Arctic Research Centre in Denmark.[60]

Other actions recommended by the Council were already under way in the United States. For example, in 2009, the Council recommended that

[58]Through the analysis, we identified 21 Ministerial Declaration statements that endorsed Arctic Council work products.

[59]Arctic Council, *Salekhard Declaration: On the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the Arctic Council, the Fifth Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting* (Salekhard, Russia: Oct. 26, 2006).

[60]FWS leads the U.S. efforts to implement the Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program, with participation from NOAA and other agencies.

the Arctic States apply guidelines developed by the Council for offshore oil and gas development.[61] According to a BOEM official, these guidelines reflected some practices already used in the United States, such as conducting environmental studies to establish baseline information for a region included in an oil and gas lease sale. In another example, the Council declarations in 2011 and 2013 encouraged Arctic States to implement recommendations in Council reports on short-lived climate forcers, including black carbon.[62] According to State officials, the United States has already implemented some actions aimed at reducing black carbon pollution. These actions include developing standards under the Clean Air Act to reduce emissions of particulate matter, of which black carbon is a component, as well as implementing voluntary EPA programs to retrofit diesel vehicles, the largest source of black carbon emissions.

In addition to voluntary recommendations adopted through the Council, starting in 2011, the United States signed multilateral agreements with the other Arctic States on search and rescue and oil spill preparedness and response that were developed by Council task forces.[63] In the 2011 *Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic* (Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement), the Arctic States committed to search and rescue actions, such as

- promoting the establishment, operation, and maintenance of an adequate and effective search and rescue capability within an area specified in the agreement;

[61]Arctic Council, *Tromsø Declaration: On the Occasion of the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council* (Tromsø, Norway: Apr. 29, 2009); Arctic Council Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment Working Group, *Arctic Offshore Oil and Gas Guidelines* (Akureyri, Iceland: Apr. 29, 2009).

[62]Arctic Council, *Nuuk Declaration: On the Occasion of the Seventh Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council* (Nuuk, Greenland: May 12, 2011); Arctic Council Secretariat, *Kiruna Declaration: On the Occasion of the Eighth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council* (Kiruna, Sweden: May 15, 2013); Arctic Council Task Force on Short-Lived Climate Forcers, *An Assessment of Emissions and Mitigation Options for Black Carbon for the Arctic Council* (April 2011); Arctic Council Task Force on Short-Lived Climate Forcers, *Recommendations to Reduce Black Carbon and Methane Emissions to Slow Arctic Climate Change* (May 2013).

[63]According to State officials, the United States signed the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement as an executive agreement, which does not require Senate ratification to enter into force for the United States. The officials also said that the United States signed the Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Agreement but has not consented to be bound by it.

- ensuring that assistance is provided to anyone in distress regardless of the nationality or status of such a person or circumstances in which that person is found;
- exchanging information that may serve to improve the effectiveness of search and rescue operations; and
- meeting with the other parties on a regular basis to consider and resolve issues regarding practical cooperation.[64]

In the 2013 *Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic* (Arctic Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Agreement), Arctic States committed to oil spill preparedness and response actions, such as

- maintaining a system for responding promptly and effectively to oil pollution incidents;
- establishing, as appropriate, a minimum level of prepositioned oil spill combating equipment;
- establishing, as appropriate, a program of exercises for oil pollution response organizations and training of relevant personnel;
- establishing, as appropriate, plans and communications capabilities for responding to an oil pollution incident;
- promoting cooperation and coordination by endeavoring to carry out joint exercises and training; and
- developing and maintaining, with the other parties to the agreement, a set of operational guidelines to assist in the agreement's implementation but these guidelines will not be legally binding.[65]

The Coast Guard acts as the lead agency for implementing the two agreements and has taken or planned various actions in response. These actions include the following:

- **Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement.** According to Coast Guard officials, the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement solidified

[64]*Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic* (Nuuk, Greenland: May 12, 2011).

[65]*Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic* (Kiruna, Sweden: May 15, 2013).

partnerships with neighboring countries and formalized an existing understanding but did not formally commit the United States to allocate additional resources to search and rescue in the Arctic. Since the agreement was signed, the United States has organized some high-level meetings and committed to joint training exercises. Even while meeting the intent of the agreement, the absence of a permanent physical presence in the region limits the U.S. government's ability to respond to vessels or persons in distress in the Arctic, according to Coast Guard and State officials.

- **Arctic Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Agreement.** The Coast Guard has not dedicated any additional resources to implement this agreement but plans to participate in the first exercise under the agreement in 2014 with the other Arctic States, according to Coast Guard officials. An oil and gas industry stakeholder said that the Coast Guard could face challenges implementing the agreement in the event of an oil spill incident because the government does not own adequate equipment to respond to an emergency. This stakeholder said that oil and shipping companies own approximately 90 percent of the emergency response equipment in the Arctic. However, Coast Guard officials said the agency plays an oversight role in maritime incident response and that industry must provide any response resources.

State Does Not Track Agencies' Progress Toward Implementing Recommendations

State does not review or track agencies' overall progress toward implementing the recommendations the United States has adopted through the Council. According to State officials, agencies discuss the implementation of recommendations informally during monthly interagency Arctic Policy Group meetings, but State does not formally follow up with the agencies to identify their progress toward implementation. Several senior agency officials said that historically, the United States has not made a concerted effort to follow up on recommendations because the Council had not been a high priority for State. However, the officials said that State has increased the priority of the Council recommendations as the United States prepares to assume the Council chair in 2015.

Senior State officials said that they may need to more formally focus on follow-up and provide an overall assessment of progress made by agencies toward implementing recommendations. According to the officials, developing a process for U.S. agencies to review and track implementation progress would increase accountability across the government, enhance coordination across agencies, and avoid overlap.

However, the officials also said that they would have to weigh the benefits of such a process against the resources it would require for maintenance.

Without such a process to review and track progress toward implementing Council recommendations, State officials said that State and other key agencies do not know the status of the recommendations and could face challenges planning for and prioritizing actions to address Arctic issues. Specifically, State officials said that the agencies use the same resources to implement recommendations as they do for their other Council work, so adopting new actions reduces the resources available to take on the increasing workload of the Council working groups, task forces, and other efforts. The officials said they need to know the capacity of agencies to implement new recommendations as State prepares for the Council chairmanship through steps such as developing new project proposals and determining priorities.

Broad and Numerous Recommendations Create Implementation Challenges

Some federal officials and stakeholders directly involved in Council work said that the United States—with State as the lead agency—and other Arctic States at times face challenges implementing the broad recommendations made in the declarations and the numerous recommendations made in the working group and task force reports. First, according to the officials, the ministerial declarations do not always clearly specify measurable actions that the Council recommends Arctic States take. For example, the broad recommendations included such statements as, the Arctic States "encourage actions to reduce the risks of radioactivity in the Arctic" and "urge implementation of early actions where possible on methane and other relevant short-lived climate forcers" in the 2000 and 2009 declarations, respectively.[66]

In addition to the broad declaration recommendations, our analysis found and State officials said the working group and task force recommendations endorsed by the declaration statements are too numerous for Arctic States to fully implement. State officials said that a complete list of these recommendations does not exist, but our analysis identified several instances in which working group and task force reports and assessments had from 10 to 20 recommendations directed to the

[66]Arctic Council, *Barrow Declaration: On the Occasion of the Second Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council* (Barrow, AK USA: Oct. 13, 2000); Arctic Council, *Tromsø Declaration* (2009).

Arctic States.[67] For example, a 2004 Council climate change report included 16 recommendations related to climate change, and a 2009 Council report on Arctic pollutants made 18 related recommendations.[68] In this context, State officials said that the working groups produced too many recommendations to the Arctic States without specifying priorities, making it difficult for the States to implement all of them or focus on priority issues.

According to senior State officials, the Council does not have guidelines for developing clear and prioritized recommendations for the Arctic States. The officials said that not having such guidelines has contributed to the Council adopting broad and numerous recommendations, resulting in implementation challenges. State officials said that Arctic States intend for their governments to implement the recommendations, but act on them voluntarily and must balance recommendation implementation with competing needs and resources for the increasing volume of Council work.[69] Recognizing some of these challenges, the Council has started to take a more strategic approach to adopting recommendations than it had in the past, placing a greater focus on outcomes, according to some federal officials and stakeholders. Starting in 2006 the Council began developing a more formal process for reviewing and negotiating recommendations. However, challenges implementing the broad and numerous recommendations remain and State officials said that a need exists for the Council to more clearly specify actions with measurable outcomes and prioritize the Council recommendations to better ensure their implementation.

State officials and stakeholders said that the Council has produced valuable work but, partially due to these implementation challenges, the recommendations have not historically produced actions leading to

[67]According to State officials, the Council has initiated some efforts under the Canadian chairmanship to begin inventorying and monitoring existing recommendations at the Council level. In addition, some Council working groups have development mechanisms to follow up on recommendations made in specific reports.

[68]Arctic Council, *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment Policy Document* (Reykjavik, Iceland: November, 2004); Arctic Council, *Regional Programme of Action for the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities* (Akureyri, Iceland: Apr. 29, 2009).

[69]According to EPA officials, the Arctic States have varying abilities to implement the Council's recommendations, so the Council includes the phrase "as appropriate in their national circumstances" in the language of some recommendations to Arctic States.

measurable outcomes in addressing Arctic issues within the Council's purview. The officials said that the recommendations, if implemented, provide a means to strengthen the Council's ability to address Arctic issues, which represents a goal of the Council and the United States. Specifically, Council declarations have underscored the importance of such strengthening, and U.S. Arctic policy states that the United States seeks to strengthen institutions for cooperation among the eight Arctic States, such as the Council. When the United States assumes the chairmanship in 2015, it will have an opportunity to guide and more effectively advance the Council's efforts to address Arctic issues. For example, according to the 2013 *National Arctic Strategy Implementation Plan*, the United States will lead the development of the 2015 ministerial declaration that will include recommendations related to priorities for the U.S. chairmanship.

Conclusions

The Arctic region's rapid changes alter the environment, provide economic opportunities, and affect the people living there. With these changes and an increase in global attention on the region, the Council's work will likely continue to expand. The federal government has increased its focus on Arctic issues, and U.S. participation in the Council provides a forum to address some of these issues, collaborate domestically and internationally, and leverage resources. State leads U.S. participation in the Council and relies heavily on the work of other federal agencies for most of the U.S. contributions to the Council. However, State has not established a joint strategy for U.S. participation that outlines a clear direction or specifies necessary resources. Without a joint strategy, key collaborating agencies may continue to face challenges prioritizing the work, delivering unified messages, and consistently participating in the Council. In addition, the U.S. chairmanship will span two presidential administrations, making it particularly important to plan for continuity.

Furthermore, as Arctic issues have emerged and become a priority for the United States, State has increased its attention on the voluntary recommendations the United States has adopted through the Council and identified a need to more formally follow up on and assess progress toward implementing them. Because State does not have a process to review and track progress made by U.S. agencies to implement recommendations, State faces challenges planning for and prioritizing future areas of action on Arctic issues within the Council's purview. This will become increasingly important when the United States chairs the Council starting in 2015, providing State with valuable opportunities to shape future Council priorities.

Finally, State has recognized the importance of strengthening the Council's ability to make progress toward addressing Arctic issues through implementing recommendations and identified the need to more clearly specify actions with measurable outcomes and prioritize recommended actions. Specifically, State officials said the Council does not have guidelines for adopting clear and prioritized recommendations. Having no such guidelines has led to the Council adopting broad and numerous recommendations that the Arctic States face challenges implementing. As a result, State officials said that the Council has produced valuable work, but the recommendations have not historically produced actions leading to measurable results in addressing Arctic issues.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To help clarify the direction of future U.S. participation and position the United States for a successful Arctic Council chairmanship, assess the status of recommendations adopted through the Council, and strengthen the Council's ability to address Arctic issues within its purview, we recommend that the Secretary of State take the following three actions:

- As a part of its responsibilities in assuming the Council chair in 2015 and in collaboration with other relevant agencies, develop a joint strategy for U.S. participation in the Council that outlines a clear direction for the agencies and identifies resources needed to sustain collaborative efforts and consistent participation in the Council.
- Develop a process to review and track U.S. progress in implementing existing and any future recommendations.
- Work with other Arctic States to develop guidelines for producing clear recommendations with measurable actions and prioritizing the recommendations.

Agency Comments

We provided EPA, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Interior, State, and USGCRP with a draft of this report for review and comment. In written comments, reproduced in appendix VIII, State generally agreed with our recommendations. State also noted that the Council recommendations we discuss in the report are expressly voluntary and should be differentiated from more formal commitments made through the international agreements. We modified the text to make this distinction.

EPA, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Interior, and USGCRP provided technical comments that we incorporated as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the Administrator of the EPA, Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Energy, Secretary of Homeland Security, Secretary of the Interior, Secretary of State, Executive Director of USGCRP, the appropriate congressional committees, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202)512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Appendix IX lists the GAO staff who made key contributions to the report.

J. Alfredo Gómez
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

List of Requesters

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate

The Honorable John Garamendi
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

The Honorable Timothy H. Bishop
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

The Honorable Rick Larsen
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We were asked to review matters related to U.S. participation in the Arctic Council (Council). This report examines (1) how the Council is organized and how it addresses environmental and economic development issues; (2) how U.S. federal agencies with a key leadership role participate in the Council and the associated challenges, if any; and (3) the actions the Department of State (State) and other federal agencies have taken to implement and manage voluntary recommendations the United States has adopted through the Council and associated challenges, if any.

To choose from the many federal agencies involved in Council work and to scope our work, we selected agencies that hold key leadership roles. We chose State because it leads U.S. participation in the Council and agencies that head the U.S. delegations to the six Council working groups. These agencies are the U.S. Global Change Research Program, the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration.

To provide information to answer all three of our objectives, we interviewed the following:

1. knowledgeable officials from the key federal agencies with a leadership role in the Council;
2. leaders of Permanent Participant organizations that represent Alaska Natives in the Council, including the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, and Inuit Circumpolar Council; and
3. key Arctic stakeholders.

To select key Arctic stakeholders, we first identified a potential list of over 100 contacts by conducting research, as well as collecting referrals through a snowballed process, starting with key agency officials and stakeholders known to have direct involvement in the Council. Our list included contacts who represented diverse perspectives such as federal agencies, Alaska state agencies, nongovernmental organizations, groups representing Alaska Natives, science and policy research organizations, industry groups, and academic institutions. We ranked each contact from highest to lowest priority based on whether they: (1) had significant involvement in the Council – the six key agencies, Alaska-based Permanent Participants, and the state of Alaska; (2) were referred to us based on their experience working with the Council in the past; (3)

worked with the Council as identified by Council documents or individual biographical research, but were not referred to us; and (4) represented an organization that applied for Council Observer status, or was in the process of doing so during our review. Once we organized our stakeholder list based on these rankings, we categorized the list by topic areas to acquire a balance of perspectives. These topic areas included environmental groups, federal agencies, health and human development groups, indigenous groups, industry, local or state agencies, policy groups, and science and research groups. Finally, we narrowed our list of stakeholders to those who were the highest priority based on our rankings, could offer a diverse perspectives, and had availability while ensuring alignment with GAO's allotted staff resources and time. Because of our scope and resources, we did not interview all stakeholders. Findings from our report based on stakeholder perspectives are not generalizable.

In addition, to identify how the Council is organized and addresses environmental and economic development issues, we attended a Council Senior Arctic Officials meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, in March 2013, and we analyzed Council documents, academic publications, and the Council's website. We also reviewed Arctic State publications, peer-reviewed academic literature, and nongovernmental organization reports published from 2008 to 2013. We determined these sources were sufficiently sound for our purpose. Furthermore, we focused on Arctic environmental and economic issues because the Council's mission outlines these as issues to address. We did not assess the effectiveness of the Council.

In addition to conducting interviews with key U.S. federal agency officials to determine how they participate in the Council and identify any associated challenges, we reviewed relevant agency and Council documents. We also conducted site visits to the Arctic Alaskan communities of Barrow, Kivalina, Kotzebue, and Wainwright. We met with community leaders to learn their perspectives on environmental and economic issues facing their community and how, if at all, key federal agencies considered their interests in their Council work. We selected these four communities based on the following factors: (1) stakeholder referrals, (2) location above the Arctic Circle, (3) representation of a range of community sizes and perspectives, and (4) accessibility in order to accommodate GAO's allotted staff and financial resources. Findings from these site visits cannot be generalized to those we did not include in our nonprobability sample. In addition to these four locations, we visited Anchorage, Alaska, where we interviewed knowledgeable Alaska state

officials, key Arctic stakeholders, and two Permanent Participant group representatives to help inform our objectives.

Finally, to identify and assess the actions that State and other federal agencies take to implement and manage voluntary recommendations the United States has adopted through the Council, we first analyzed Council ministerial declarations from 1998 to 2013 to develop a list of statements that directed actions to Arctic States. To create the list, two analysts independently identified these statements, compared results, and resolved any differences. We then asked State officials to review our list and identify which statements they viewed as Council recommendations to Arctic States. We also analyzed Council reports endorsed in the recommendations and the two multilateral agreements negotiated through the Council. Finally, we selected examples of actions agencies took to implement Council recommendations and multilateral agreements.

This report will contribute to a multilateral audit of the Council led by the Supreme Audit Institutions of Norway and Russia, also with participation by Denmark, and Sweden.[1] The Supreme Audit Institutions of Canada, Finland, and Iceland observed the multilateral audit.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2012 to May 2014 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

[1]A Supreme Audit Institution is the national audit office of a country. GAO is the Supreme Audit Institution of the United States.

Appendix II: Arctic Council Chairmanships

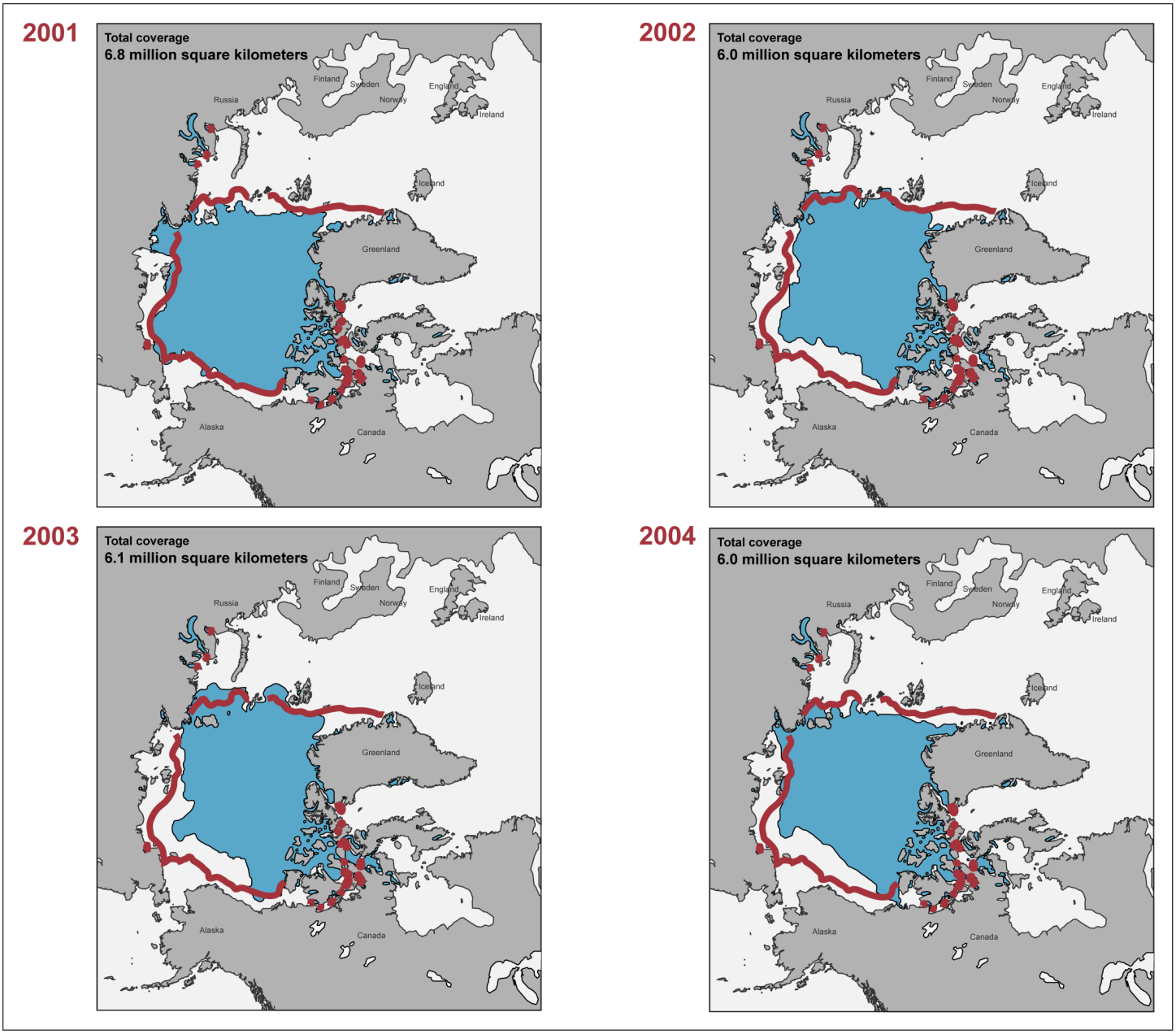
Arctic state	Chairmanship years	Location of ministerial meeting
Canada	1996-1998	Iqaluit, Canada
United States of America	1998-2000	Barrow, Alaska
Finland	2000-2002	Inari, Finland
Iceland	2002-2004	Reykjavik, Iceland
Russia	2004-2006	Salekhard, Russia
Norway	2006-2009	Tromsø, Norway
Denmark	2009-2011	Nuuk, Greenland
Sweden	2011-2013	Kiruna, Sweden
Canada	2013-2015	To be determined

Source: Arctic Council

Appendix III: Full Text of Figure 1, Changes in September Ice Coverage from 2001 to 2013, Compared with the 1979-2000 Median September Ice Coverage

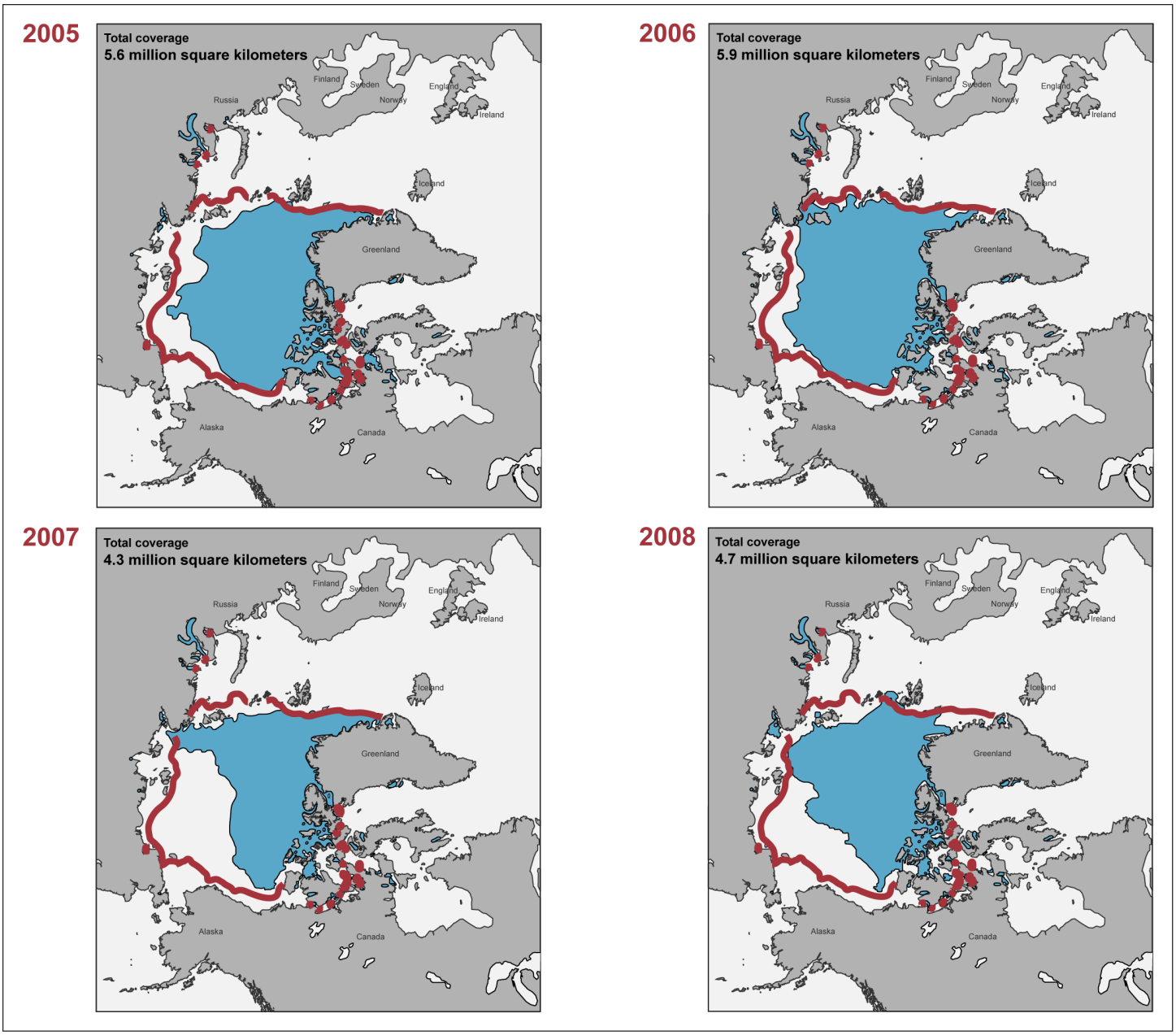
Figure 7 shows changes in September sea ice coverage, by year from 2001 through 2013 (see interactive fig. 1).

Figure 7: September Sea Ice Coverage, 2001 through 2013



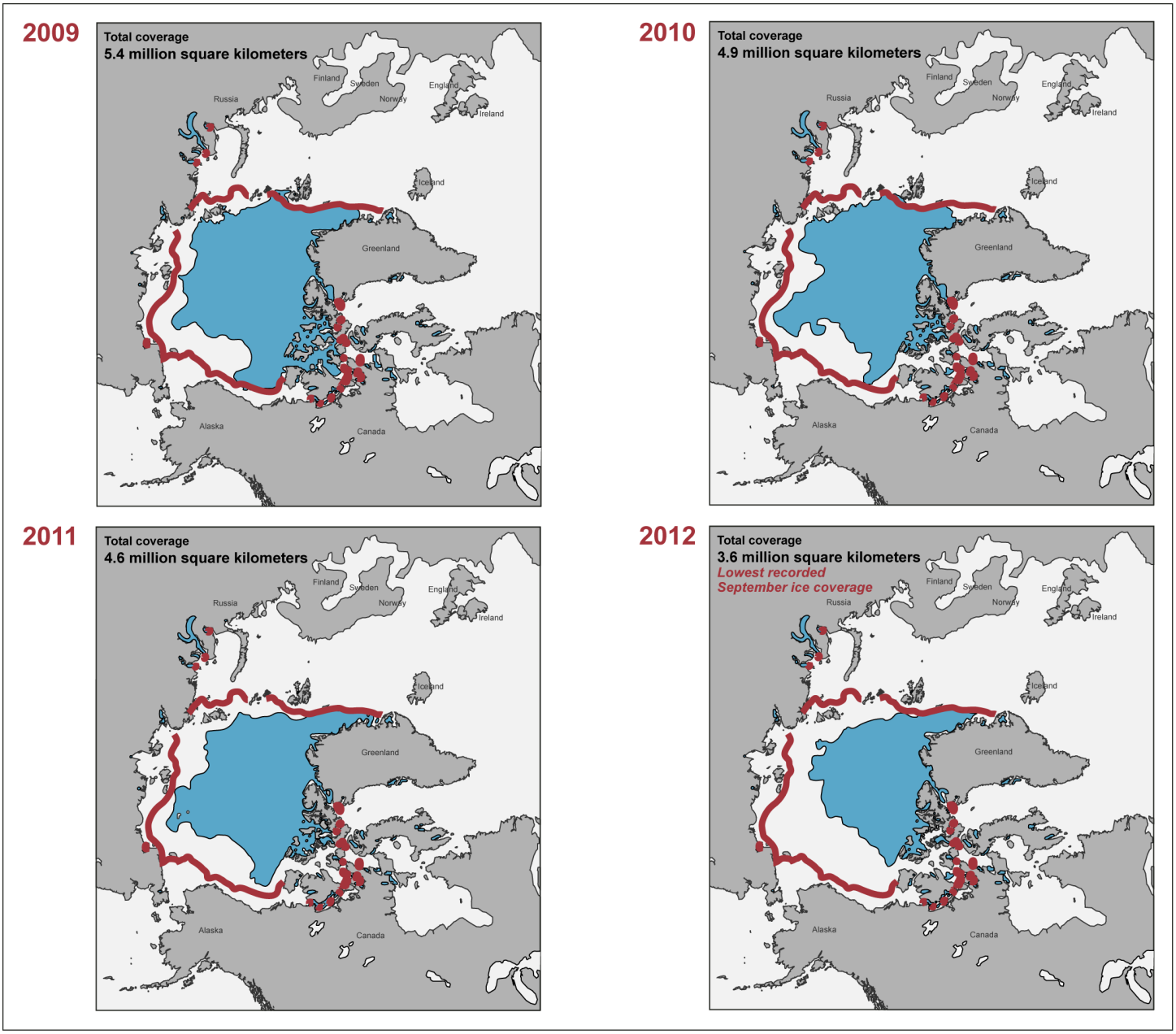
Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center.

Appendix III: Full Text of Figure 1, Changes in September Ice Coverage from 2001 to 2013, Compared with the 1979-2000 Median September Ice Coverage



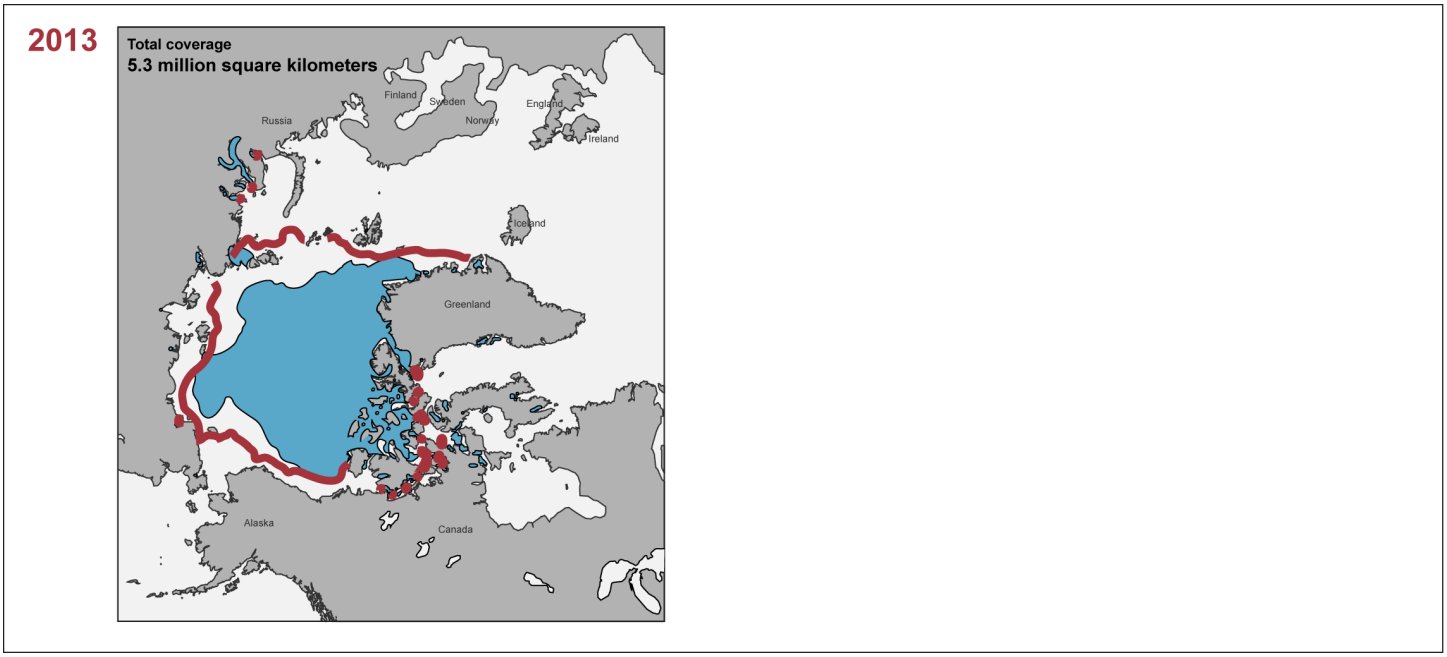
Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center.

Appendix III: Full Text of Figure 1, Changes in September Ice Coverage from 2001 to 2013, Compared with the 1979-2000 Median September Ice Coverage



Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center.

Appendix III: Full Text of Figure 1, Changes in September Ice Coverage from 2001 to 2013, Compared with the 1979-2000 Median September Ice Coverage



Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center.

Appendix IV: U.S. Agencies Participating in Arctic Council Working Groups and Task Forces as of January 2014

Arctic Council working groups	
Arctic Contaminants Action Program	
	Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy
	Department of State
	Environmental Protection Agency
Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program	
	Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Department of Energy
	Department of Health and Human, Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
	Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey
	Environmental Protection Agency
	Executive Office of the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy
	Executive Office of the President, U.S. Global Change Research Program
	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
	National Science Foundation
	United States Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service
Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna	
	Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management/ North Slope Science Initiative
	Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
	Executive Office of the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy
	Marine Mammal Commission
	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
	National Science Foundation
Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response	
	Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration
	Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
	Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
	Environmental Protection Agency
Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment	
	Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Department of Defense, U.S. Navy
	Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement

	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
	Department of State
	Environmental Protection Agency
	Marine Mammal Commission
Sustainable Development Working Group	
	Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Department of Energy
	Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
	Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Global Affairs
	Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Department of the Interior U.S. Geological Survey
	Department of State
	Environmental Protection Agency
	National Science Foundation
	U.S. Arctic Research Commission
Arctic Council task forces	
Task Force on Black Carbon and Methane	
	Environmental Protection Agency
	Department of State
Task Force on Science Cooperation	
	Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Department of Defense, U.S. Navy, Office of Naval Research
	Department of Energy
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service
	Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey
	Department of State
	Environmental Protection Agency
	Executive Office of the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy
	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
	National Science Foundation
	U.S. Arctic Research Commission
Task Force on Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Prevention	
	Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

	Department of Energy
	Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Department of the Interior, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
	Department of State
	Environmental Protection Agency
Task Force to Create a Circumpolar Business Forum	
	Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard
	Department of State
	U.S. Arctic Research Commission

Source: Department of State

Appendix V: Arctic Policy Group Participants as of December 2013

Executive Office of the President	
	National Ocean Council
	National Security Council
	Office of Science and Technology Policy
	U.S. Global Change Research Program
Federal agencies	
Department of Commerce	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Department of Defense	Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson
	Joint Chiefs of Staff
	Office of the Secretary of Defense
	U.S. Air Force
	U.S. European Command
	U.S. Navy
	U.S. Northern Command
Department of Energy	National Nuclear Security Administration
	Office of International Affairs
	Office of Science
	National Nuclear Security Administration
Department of Health and Human Services	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
	National Institutes of Health
	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Department of Homeland Security	Federal Emergency Management Agency
	U.S. Coast Guard
Department of the Interior	Bureau of Indian Affairs
	Bureau of Land Management - North Slope Science Initiative
	Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
	National Park Service
	Office of the Secretary
	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
	U.S. Geological Survey
Department of Justice	——
Department of State	——
Department of Transportation	Federal Aviation Administration
	Maritime Administration
Other federal entities	
	Environmental Protection Agency
	Marine Mammal Commission

	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
	National Science Foundation
	Office of the Federal Coordinator for Alaska Natural Gas Transportation Projects
	Smithsonian Institution
	U.S. Arctic Research Commission
State of Alaska	
	Office of the Governor
	Office of the Lieutenant Governor

Source: Department of State

Appendix VI: Full Text of Figure 6, Arctic Alaska Site Visits

Barrow

Name: Barrow (traditionally known as Ukpeagvik)

Population: 4,212, of which approximately 61 percent are American Indian and Alaska Native, which includes Iñupiat Eskimos.

Location: Located on the Chukchi Sea coast, Barrow is the northernmost community in the United States.

Brief background: During the 1940s and 1950s, the military played an influential role in the Barrow area and constructed a Distant Early Warning line – a system of radar stations established to detect incoming Soviet bombers during the cold war and provide early warning of incursions into North American airspace. Exploration in the National Petroleum Reserve, which is a 22.8-million acre area with oil on Alaska's North Slope, brought new people to the region, and construction of the Prudhoe Bay oilfields and Trans-Alaska Pipeline have each contributed to its development. Since that time, tax revenues from the North Slope oil fields fund services in the area. Barrow has become the economic, transportation, and administrative center for Alaska's North Slope region.

Main industries providing employment: According to 2008 to 2012 data, out of 1,969 employed, 23 percent were in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 22 percent were in public administration; and 13 percent were in retail trade.

Alaska Native concerns on various Arctic issues: Some community leaders said they were concerned about the affects of increased Arctic activities and change in the climate on their access to subsistence resources, as well as limited plans and regulations to guide oil exploration and response to spills.

Kivalina

Name: Kivalina (traditionally known as Kivaliniq)

Population: 374, of which approximately 96 percent are American Indian and Alaska Native, which includes Iñupiat Eskimos.

Location: Kivalina is at the tip of an 8-mile barrier reef located between the Chukchi Sea and Kivalina River. It is 80 air miles northwest of Kotzebue and approximately 50 miles from the Red Dog Mine.

Brief background: The first recorded history of Kivalina occurred in 1847 when a Russian naval officer mistook a seasonal hunting camp at the north end of Kivalina Lagoon as a permanent settlement. Kivalina was located at its current location in 1905 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs built a school on the southern tip of the island. This compelled people who lived in the original Kivalina to migrate to the Kivalina created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Main industries providing employment: According to 2008 to 2012 data, out of 132 employed, 24 percent were in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 23 percent were in retail trade; and 17 percent were in public administration.

Alaska Native concerns on various Arctic issues: Community leaders said severe coastal erosion has significantly affected Kivalina. The village intends to relocate to a new site 2.5 miles away. In addition, homes do not have full plumbing, and there is only one public space with three showers available.

Kotzebue

Name: Kotzebue (traditionally known as Kikiktagruk)

Population: 3,201, of which approximately 74 percent are American Indian and Alaska Native, which includes Iñupiat Eskimos.

Location: Kotzebue lies on the Baldwin Peninsula in Kotzebue Sound where the Noatak, Kobuk, and Selawik rivers end.

Brief background: The Iñupiat have occupied the area for at least 600 years. The site was a trading location for local natives for hundreds of years. Expansion of economic activities, such as oil and mineral exploration, and services to support these activities contributed to Kotzebue's development. Kotzebue is the service and transportation center for all villages in Alaska's northwest region.

Main industries providing employment: According to 2008 to 2012 data, out of 1,326 employed, 38 percent were in educational services, health care and social assistance; 13 percent were in transportation, warehousing, and utilities; and 11 percent were in public administration.

Alaska Native concerns on various Arctic issues: Community leaders said they have seen changes in sea ice, which affects the community's

traditional subsistence lifestyle. As a result, many have turned to participating in the cash based economy, although there is strong desire to return to their traditional lifestyle.

Wainwright

Name: Wainwright (traditionally known as Olgoonik)

Population: 556, of which approximately 92 percent are American Indian and Alaska Native, which includes Iñupiat Eskimos.

Location: Wainwright sits on a wave-eroded coastal bluff of a narrow peninsula, which separates Wainwright Inlet from the Chukchi Sea. Wainwright is about 70 miles southwest of Barrow.

Brief background: The region around Wainwright was traditionally well populated, though the present village was not established until 1904 – when the Alaska Native Service built a school and instituted medical and other services. Wainwright is the third largest village in Alaska's North Slope region.

Main industries providing employment: According to 2008 to 2012 data, out of 233 employed, 25 percent were in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 15 percent were in construction; and 13 percent were in transportation, warehousing, and utilities.

Alaska Native concerns on various Arctic issues: Community leaders said they were concerned about the effects of climate change in their community and were in the process of constructing a seawall to protect a bluff from wave erosion. Leaders also said they would like to increase responsible oil and gas exploration to help support the community's lifestyle.

Appendix VII: Arctic Council Declaration Statements Identified by Department of State Officials as Recommendations to Arctic States

Year	Declaration	No.	Declaration statement
1998	Iqaluit	1.	Reaffirm our commitment from the Alta Declaration to take the findings and recommendations from the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme Report, Arctic Pollution Issues: A State of the Arctic Environment Report, into consideration in our policies and programmes, to increase our efforts to limit and reduce emissions of contaminants into the environment and to promote international cooperation and make a determined effort to secure support for international actions in order to address the serious pollution risks reported by the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme.
2000	Barrow	2.	Endorse and adopt the Arctic Council Plan to Eliminate Pollution in the Arctic.
		3.	Encourage actions to reduce the risks of radioactivity to the Arctic.
2002	Inari	4.	Acknowledge the recommendations arising from the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna report Arctic Flora and Fauna, Status and Conservation as a strategy for future biodiversity conservation work of the Arctic Council.
		5.	The Ministers took note of recommendations generated by projects on timberline forests, sustainable reindeer husbandry, and sacred sites and encourage further dialogue among stakeholders on this basis.
		6.	Welcome with appreciation Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme's "Arctic Pollution 2002" Report and take the recommendations into consideration in our policies and programmes to reduce pollution affecting the Arctic.
2004	Reykjavik	7.	Encourage Member States to take effective measures to adapt to and manage the environmental, economic and social impacts of climate change and ultraviolet radiation, inter alia through enhancing the access of Arctic residents to information, decision makers and institutional capacity building.
		8.	Encourage relevant national and international research bodies and sponsors to take into account the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment science recommendations in the planning, development, and implementation of their programmes.
2004	Reykjavik	9.	Endorse the Arctic Marine Strategic Plan and encourage its implementation through the working groups and other mechanisms and in cooperation with regional and global bodies.
		10.	Encourage Member States and others to disseminate the Arctic Waters Oil Transfer Guidelines widely.
		11.	Direct Member States and the relevant working groups of the Arctic Council to consider appropriate follow-up actions [to the Arctic Human Development Report].
2006	Salekhard	12.	Reconfirm [Arctic States'] commitments to the Reykjavik Declaration and to the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment policy document, adopted at the Arctic Council meeting in 2004, and that the Member States will continue their active efforts to implement the recommendations on mitigation, adaptation, research, monitoring and outreach.
		13.	Urge Member States and other entities to strengthen monitoring and research efforts needed to comprehensively address Arctic change and to promote the establishment of a circumpolar Arctic observing network of monitoring stations with coordinated data handling and information exchange for scientific data, statistics, and traditional knowledge as a lasting legacy of the International Polar Year (and as the evolving Arctic component of the Global Earth Observing System of Systems).
		14.	Encourage research and practical actions, as well as exchange of expertise and best practices among the Member States to increase stability of the Arctic infrastructure in changing climatic conditions.
		15.	Urge all the Member countries to maintain and extend long-term monitoring of change in all parts of the Arctic.

Year	Declaration	No.	Declaration statement
2006	Salekhard	16.	Encourage the Arctic Council Member States to implement the Assessment Report on Acidifying Pollutants, Arctic Haze, and Acidification in the Arctic recommendations addressing acidification and Arctic haze effects, as appropriate, recognizing that the effects are regional in nature.
		17.	Endorse long-term monitoring of Arctic biodiversity to provide policymakers with the information needed to accurately assess the impacts from global environmental change and increased human activities related to regional development and economic growth.
		18.	Encourage countries to contribute actively to Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program and expect the program to provide valuable data for increased knowledge and improved management of biodiversity in the Arctic.
		19.	Encourage the Arctic Council Member States to focus on the following areas and initiate new projects in order to improve the capacity to respond to emergencies in the Arctic: • exchange of information, training and experience • public information• technical development and support, and • coordination of response
2009	Tromsø	20.	Urge implementation of early actions where possible on methane and other short-lived climate forcers
		21.	Urge the Arctic Council members to strengthen their work on adaptation to climate change, including by pursuing community-level actions and continue to share information on best practices
		22.	Encourage collaboration with the Methane to Markets Partnership and other relevant international bodies taking action to reduce methane and other short-lived forcers
		23.	Encourage the continuation of this work [the Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks] with emphasis on improving sustained long-term observation
		24.	Approve the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment 2009 Report including its recommendations on enhancing Arctic marine safety, protecting Arctic people and environment and building Arctic marine infrastructure
		25.	Urge all States to apply the Arctic Council Offshore Oil and Gas Guidelines throughout the Arctic as minimum standards in national regulations
		26.	Encourage the continued implementation of the Arctic Council Programme of Action for the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment from Land-based Activities
		27.	Approve the findings and recommendations of the assessment of Oil and Gas Activities in the Arctic: Effects and Potential Effects
		28.	Decide to strengthen cooperation on prevention of, and response to, accidental spills of oil and hazardous substances in the Arctic
		29.	Urge Member States to apply the precautionary approach and polluter-pays principle as reflected in Principles 15 and 16 of the Rio Declaration, respectively, and conduct risk and environmental impact assessments for the exploration, development, transport and storage of oil, and enact and/or enforce appropriate laws and controls
2011	Nuuk	30.	Encourage Arctic States to implement, as appropriate in their national circumstances, relevant recommendations [from the Arctic Council Report on Short-Lived Climate Forcers] for reducing emissions of black carbon
2013	Kiruna	31.	Welcome the report on short-lived climate forcers and support its recommendations including that national black carbon emission inventories for the Arctic should continue to be developed and reported as a matter of priority
		32.	Announce the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic and encourage future national, bi-national, and multinational contingency plans, training and exercises, to develop effective response measures

Year	Declaration	No.	Declaration statement
2013	Kiruna	33.	Welcome the Recommended Practices in Prevention of Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Project reports and recommendations to Ministers, and encourage Arctic States to pursue further work in the recommended areas
		34.	Welcome the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment, the first Arctic-wide comprehensive assessment of status and emerging trends in Arctic biodiversity, approve its recommendations, and encourage Arctic States to follow up on its recommendations
		35.	Encourage Arctic States to take decisive action to help sustain Arctic biodiversity and implement internationally agreed biodiversity objectives, to cooperate on adaptive management strategies for vulnerable species and ecosystems, and to continue existing Arctic biodiversity research and monitoring efforts through the Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program
		36.	Welcome the Arctic Ocean Acidification assessment, approve its recommendation and request the Arctic States to continue to take action on mitigation and adaptation and to monitor and assess the state of the Arctic Ocean acidification
		37.	Welcome the Arctic Ocean Review report, undertaken to provide guidance to Arctic States on strengthening governance in the Arctic through a cooperative, coordinated, and integrated approach to the management of the Arctic marine environment, approve its recommendations and request appropriate follow-up action, and report on progress at subsequent ministerial meetings
		38.	Encourage Arctic States to continue monitoring and assessment activities and enhance their efforts to meet the objectives of the Stockholm Convention
		39.	Welcome the report on Ecosystem Based Management, approve the definition, principles and recommendations, encourage Arctic States to implement recommendations both within and across boundaries

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information

Appendix VIII: Comments from the Department of State

United States Department of State
Comptroller
P.O. Box 150008
Charleston, SC 29415-5008

MAY 05 2014

Dr. Loren Yager
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Dr. Yager:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "ARCTIC ISSUES: Better Direction and Management of Commitments Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation" GAO Job Code 361458.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Julia Gourley, Senior Arctic Official, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs at (202) 647-3264.

Sincerely,

Christopher H. Flaggs, Acting

Enclosure: as stated.

cc: GAO – J. Alfredo Gomez
OES – Judith G.Garber, Acting
State/OIG – Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

ARCTIC ISSUES: Better Direction and Management of Commitments Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation
(GAO-14-435, GAO Code 361548)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report entitled "Arctic Issues: Better Direction and Management of Commitments Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation."

The Arctic Council was created in 1996 as a "high-level intergovernmental forum of the eight Arctic States and the Arctic indigenous peoples to provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues." It is not a regulatory body and has no mandate to require actions of its member states. Throughout this report (and particularly pages 31-37), the term "commitments" is used in a manner that encompasses many recommendations that are not in fact commitments of the eight Arctic States. For example, the vast majority of the recommendations of Arctic Council's Working Groups endorsed in various manners by the Council are expressly voluntary, inviting Arctic States to consider taking a certain course of action "as appropriate" or consistent with national circumstances. Many of these recommendations are aspirational in nature. The report treats these recommendations as though they were commitments undertaken by the Arctic States, and does not adequately differentiate between such voluntary recommendations and commitments made in legally binding international agreements. We would suggest that the word "commitments" be replaced with "recommendations" to more accurately reflect the nature of the Council's work, except in those cases where the Arctic States have actually undertaken a commitment (e.g., in the two international agreements addressed in the report).

Nevertheless, the benefit of the Arctic Council producing recommendations to the member states is that they highlight important issues – in some cases issues that have received little public attention – so that the general public is made aware of developments in the region that they otherwise may not have known about. Observers and other stakeholders in the Arctic region are important sources of public outreach and education about the rapid changes taking place in the Arctic, and Arctic Council reports, assessments and other project documents are often the only sources – or at least the most current and accurate sources – of information they can use in their own efforts to build support for positive change in the region.

The Department of State generally supports the three proposed recommendations for Executive Branch action. Two of the three proposed recommendations entail action to be taken by the U.S. government with the goal of strengthening United States participation in the Arctic Council. The third recommendation is intended to strengthen the Council itself.

Regarding the two U.S. government-specific recommendations, we believe that an Arctic Council strategy could provide benefits to the Executive Branch by formalizing United States participation in the Council and giving it higher priority within each agency. We would consider such a strategy to be complementary to the National Strategy for the Arctic Region and other Executive Branch Arctic strategies, and would develop it on that basis. This report suggests that such a strategy be completed prior to the beginning of the U.S. chairmanship of the Council in April 2015, and although we agree that is an important goal, it may not be possible to complete by then.

We also agree that a tracking system to review progress in implementing Arctic Council recommendations would be useful, although the staff time and resources that would be required to maintain such a system may render it a lower priority than the other two recommendations.

Finally, we agree that the Arctic Council would benefit from having guidelines for producing clear, prioritized recommendations with measureable actions. This would be compatible with one of our overarching goals: to strengthen the Council and leave it in a stronger position than when we took the chair. We will give this serious consideration as we develop our chairmanship program.

We appreciate GAO's work in this area and its useful insights into and recommendations for the U.S. government's participation in the Arctic Council.

Appendix IX: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

J. Alfredo Gómez, (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Michael Hix (Assistant Director), Cheryl Arvidson, Keesha Egebrecht, Cindy Gilbert, Jessica Hilbrich, Anne Hobson, Dan Royer, Jeanette Soares, Emily Suarez-Harris, and Kiki Theodoropoulos made key contributions to this report.

Related GAO Products

Maritime Infrastructure: Key Issues Related to Commercial Activity in the U.S. Arctic Over the Next Decade. GAO-14-299. Washington, D.C.: March 19, 2014.

*Managing for Result: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups.*GAO-14-220. Washington, D.C.: February 14, 2014.

Arctic Capabilities: DOD Addressed Many Specified Reporting Elements in Its 2011 Arctic Report but Should Take Steps to Meet Near- and Long-term Needs. GAO-12-180. Washington, D.C.: January 13, 2012.

Managing for Results, Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms. GAO-12-1022. Washington, D.C.: September 27, 2012.

Coast Guard: Efforts to Identify Arctic Requirements Are Ongoing, but More Communication about Agency Planning Efforts Would Be Beneficial. GAO-10-870. Washington, D.C.: September 15, 2010.

National Security: Key Challenges and Solutions to Strengthen Interagency Collaborations. GAO-10-822T. Washington, D.C.: June 9, 2010.

Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress Has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion. GAO-09-551. Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2009.

Result- Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies. GAO-06-15. Washington, D.C.: October 21, 2005.

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