

Congress hears Alaskan views on Arctic Ocean issue

By [Tim Bradner](#)

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As oil and gas exploration and commercial shipping increases in Arctic regions, the U.S. Coast Guard is working to strengthen its presence in the U.S. Arctic, testing equipment and operating strategies to ensure safety, U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Thad Allen told a U.S. Senate subcommittee Aug. 20.

In his presentation to the subcommittee, Alaska Gov. Sean Parnell called for a greater Coast Guard presence in the region, including a new duty station or port on Alaska's western or northern coast.

"Diminished sea ice and increased military and commercial activity require a greater presence. They (the Coast Guard) need to move north and improve their capability. To provide homeland security, the Coast Guard must have new Arctic-class ice breakers," Parnell said.

Parnell, Allen and others spoke to the Homeland Security Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski chaired the meeting.

For the third summer season, the Coast Guard is working in the Alaskan Beaufort and Chukchi seas to test equipment and procedures, Allen said.

Climate change and the retreating polar icepack makes the Arctic more assessable, and the Coast Guard must have emergency search and rescue and oil spill response, and to provide security in regions with virtually no infrastructure, Allen said.

Shell has major exploration efforts underway in both the Beaufort and Chukchi seas and BP has production at its offshore Northstar and Endicott fields near Prudhoe Bay. Cruise ships and other commercial vessels now traverse both seas during summer.

"The United States is an Arctic nation. As the ice edge continues to recede in the summer, the extent of navigable waters increase. As we adjust to this dynamic, it is critical to recognize that the Arctic region is environmentally fragile, rich in natural resources and of significant national importance and international interest," Allen said in a prepared statement.

The Coast Guard and others at the hearing expressed particular concern with the Bering Straits, which connect the Bering and Chukchi seas and which will be the Pacific gateway to the Arctic.

"The Bering Straits is fast becoming the Bering Gate," said Mead Treadwell, chairman of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, a federal advisory panel.

Allen told the panel that the Coast Guard has found that its small vessels perform well in Arctic waters, but that there are problems with helicopters, particularly HD 65 Dolphin helicopters, which lack deicing equipment. Problems also persist with communications and inadequate mapping.

The U.S. has only two operating icebreakers with polar capabilities. One is a medium-sized vessel now employed to map the Arctic continental shelf and one is a heavy icebreaker that is spread between several commitments, including work in Antarctica.

A third polar icebreaker that was mothballed is now being refurbished, Allen said.

What's needed is a new U.S. polar icebreaker, he said.

Treadwell said the Arctic Research Commission agrees with this and that two new icebreakers are really needed.

Edward Itta, mayor of the North Slope Borough, told the subcommittee he supports pipelines bringing oil and gas discovered in the outer continental shelf ashore rather than offshore loading of tankers, which pose significant risks of spill.

"There's very little spill response capability in the Arctic, and no safe harbors for a vessel in the event of an emergency," the mayor said.

Itta also called for the government to require tankers operating in the Alaska Beaufort and Chukchi seas to have Alaska-licensed pilots, similar to requirements for coastal waters in Southern Alaska.

Itta said the government needs to do a better job of assessing environmental risks of offshore petroleum development, particularly the cumulative effects of multiple projects. "There has been a lot of resistance to this by the government," Itta said.

The lack of adequate risk assessment for planned Beaufort and Chukchi sea exploration forced the borough to seek court injunctions that has stopped work by Shell in both regions, he said.

Treadwell said the Arctic Research Commission feels the immediate need is an Arctic offshore oil spill research program, and that the government has been negligent in meeting obligations to do offshore spill research spelled out in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, passed by Congress after the massive 1989 Exxon Valdez spill Prince William Sound.

Treadwell said international cooperation in environmental regulation is a must.

"We can have the best regulation of the OCS in our side of the Chukchi Sea, but it won't help us if someone messes up on the other (Russian) side," Treadwell said.

U.S.-Russia cooperation on Arctic research has been spotty, he said. Of 14 requests U.S. researchers have made to take sea bottom soil samples in Russian waters, 12 have been denied, Treadwell said.

Lawson Brigham, of the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the lead author on a recently released Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment study, said less than 10 percent of the Arctic

Ocean is mapped to international standards.

“The hydrographic data base is not sufficient to support safe operations,” said Brigham, who is also a retired Coast Guard captain.

Another problem is lack of uniform standards and rules among marine operators from different nations. The International Maritime Organization is the appropriate body to develop uniform operating rules, Brigham said.

Dave Benton, executive director of the Marine Conservation Alliance, a fisheries industry group, urged the subcommittee to initiate multi-national agreements to restrict commercial fishing in the Arctic (the U.S. recently established a restriction for U.S.-controlled waters) along with a strong research program to gather data on fisheries resources in the Arctic. This is important because of changes underway in the distribution of salmon, crab and other species because of climate change.

Benton all singled out the lack of a regulatory framework for the Arctic as a matter of concern.

“The situation is similar to what occurred in the international waters of the Bering Sea in the 1980s, a situation we should avoid repeating,” Benton said.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, foreign fleets were pushed out of the 200-mile zones of coastal states around the world. In the Bering Sea, where large fisheries were being conducted by a number of distant-water fleets, this led to a rapid expansion of a multi-national fleet entering the international waters beyond the U.S. and Russian zones.

This area, referred to as the “donut hole,” had not been scientifically surveyed to assess stock status, there were no controls on the fishery, and enforcement consisted almost solely of the U.S. and Russians trying to patrol their respective maritime boundaries to prevent incursions into their domestic waters, Benton told the subcommittee.

Negotiations on conservation measures initiated by the U.S. and Russia with the distant-water nations of Japan, China, Poland and Korea, resulted in little until the fisheries collapsed.

“The treaty (that finally resulted) should have been in place from the beginning, and (even today) the pollock resource remains at extremely low levels. There is no fishing now in the donut hole, with the exception of tightly controlled experimental fishing to assess stock status,” Benton said. “This experience should be a warning about how events may unfold in the high Arctic. Several non-Arctic nations are already establishing a presence through research cruises and other means.”

The Marine Conservation Alliance supports an aggressive U.S. move with Canada and Russia to establish a fisheries regulatory framework, he said.

“If we can secure agreement with Russia and Canada that there will be no commercial fishing in the high seas of the Arctic Ocean, then the three largest Arctic nations can present a united front to the rest of the world with some likelihood of success in securing a (multi-national) agreement,” Benton said.

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