

Co-Chairs' Summary: Task Force on Telecommunications Infrastructure in the Arctic

Meeting 1 | Chicago, USA | September 2015

The United States hosted the first meeting of the Arctic Council's Task Force on Telecommunications Infrastructure in the Arctic (TFTIA) in Chicago on 23-24 September, 2015. The TFTIA's mandate is to "coordinate a circumpolar assessment of telecommunications infrastructure and networks. The Task Force would deliver a completed assessment to include, among other things, recommendations for public-private partnerships to enhance telecommunications access and service in the Arctic." The TFTIA is co-chaired by Norway (represented by Bo Andersen) and the Kingdom of Denmark (represented by Niels Andersen).

Attendees

Representatives from all Arctic Council Member States attended the meeting, as did representatives of Permanent Participants the Aleut International Association (AIA), the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) and the Saami Council. Accredited Observers Germany and UArctic were also present, as were several invited experts.

Proceedings

The co-chairs opened the meeting with a brief welcome and an overview of the two-pager that had been distributed to all participants in preparation for the meeting. They then invited States and Permanent Participants to offer initial remarks about the state of technological capability within their respective areas of responsibility, and to provide an initial assessment of user needs in their regions of concern.

Regarding the state of technological capabilities, delegations pointed to existing infrastructure that provides telecommunications services with varying degrees of speed and reliability to a broad spectrum of users. Regarding user needs, many delegations pointed first to the needs of communities, but made note as well of the unmet needs in areas such as navigation, environmental monitoring, aviation, telemedicine *et al.* Individual States' assessments of the "state of play" in their northern regions differed widely, from scattered small communities served entirely by satellite systems to fully-wired regions with persistently high levels of maritime activity.

Following these initial overviews, several invited experts provided more detailed information on such topics as: the myriad benefits to Arctic communities of improved communications infrastructure; the reality of satellite infrastructure and the reliability of the services thus delivered; and the current state of available connectivity in the Arctic as delivered by one major service provider.

States and Permanent Participants then discussed their common challenges, making an effort to identify those that might yield best to pan-Arctic solutions. They considered as well

the best steps for the TFTA to take towards fulfilling its mandate, and discussed the challenges of delivering a product that addresses the circumpolar Arctic and that does not repeat prior work within an 18-month time frame.

In their summary, the co-chairs noted that, due to the many similar challenges that exist across Member States, there is great potential for the States to learn from one another and identify transferable solutions to better-serve their “clients”, whether communities or other user groups. They observed, however, that important differences in context exist between Member States due partly to widely differing levels of governmental engagement in the telecommunications sector. It is also clear that many of these national needs will have to be solved nationally, while needs that are common to all states may provide good targets for efficient solutions. They emphasized that the timeline for the work of the TFTA is short, and that all delegations must think hard about how to deliver something useful and novel at the conclusion of the United States’ Chairmanship (2017). They charged Member States to consult within their governments as needed to obtain better information about infrastructure, coverage and user needs, and noted the desirability of having industry engaged throughout the work of the TFTA as an essential partner.

Outcomes

The Kingdom of Denmark promised to provide, as soon as possible, a more detailed request for information to the Member States. Within one month of receiving that request, States agreed to do their best to provide the requested information, which will then feed into a map, or maps, illustrating the extent of telecom coverage in each Member State. This information is to be provided to the designated contact point at the Kingdom of Denmark, with cc to the Arctic Council Secretariat (ACS).

States and Permanent Participants agreed to consult with colleagues as needed to obtain more detailed information on the needs of each of the user groups listed in the co-chairs’ two-pager. The needs of the local communities were well covered at this meeting, while the scientific, maritime, aeronautical and search and rescue needs were not fully covered. This information is to be provided not later than 18 December 2015 to the designated contact point for Norway, with cc to the ACS.

Member States and Permanent Participants agreed to attempt to identify concrete case studies that could provide insight into different models (successful or unsuccessful) of public-private partnerships used to expand communications capacity. Any such case studies are to be provided to the ACS by 18 December for collection and distribution.

The United States agreed to make contact with the Arctic Economic Council to explore possibilities for coordinating or information-sharing with the Arctic Economic Council’s working group on telecommunications infrastructure. This information is to be provided not later than 6 November 2015 to the co-chairs and the ACS for distribution to all.

The co-chairs agreed to provide, not later than 6 November, a more detailed work plan for the TFTA, including tentative location and date for next meeting. As discussed at the meeting, the next meeting is tentatively scheduled for the second week of February 2016 at a location either in Norway or the Kingdom of Denmark.