Memo on U.S. Chairmanship Priorities, 1998-2000

1998-11-30

U.S. Chairmanship 1998-2000

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To: Senior Arctic Officials, Permanent Participants, Working Group Chairs

Dear Colleagues:

The purpose of this communication is to set out U.S. thinking on Arctic Council priorities during the period of our Chairmanship, and, for planning purposes, to provide an initial calendar regarding proposed Council activities during this period. I hope these thoughts can serve as a basis for discussion, and I welcome your comments and suggestions.

All U.S. federal agencies engaged in the Arctic, along with our State of Alaska, are looking forward to this period as Chair of the Arctic Council. We see this as an unprecedented opportunity to develop systems for linking our nation's extensive scientific and environmental activities in the Arctic with those of the other member states, in a way that will facilitate lasting contact and cooperation. We are eager to share perceptions regarding the unique circumstances of living in the Arctic, and to work with other participants in the Council to find ways to improve life for all Arctic residents. Together, we will have a dramatic opportunity to raise the international profile of the Arctic region as we enter the 21st century.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Following the Iqaluit Ministerial, our first task is to initiate the Sustainable Development Program. The United States (with Alaskan leadership) has begun planning for its Telemedicine project, and Canada is likewise engaged in its project involving Arctic Children and Youth. The Saami fisheries management projects are also being advanced. Work is continuing on developing the other proposals noted by the Ministers in Iqaluit.

At Iqaluit, the Ministers established a Sustainable Development Working Group comprised of Senior Arctic Officials and Permanent Participants, and requested that it facilitate completion of work on sustainable development proposals, including those mentioned above. In order to take stock of progress on these matters, we propose to convene the first meeting of the Sustainable Development Working Group immediately prior to the first full SAO meeting in Alaska, which we are tentatively scheduling for the first week in May 1999 (see below).

The Sustainable Development Working Group could consider a number of issues, in addition to assessing the status of SD projects. As Ambassador Sherman informed the Ministers in Iqaluit, the United States believes public health should be a high priority under the sustainable development program. U.S. experts are looking at ways to expand...
Arctic international cooperation in this field. In addition, the difficult situation in Russia this winter has gained increased attention, and the United States will continue highlighting the need to ensure that humanitarian relief reaches those living in the far North, including indigenous groups. Red Cross officials have emphasized the deteriorating health situation, including the spread of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and diphtheria, and have offered to brief the Council. We intend to remain focused on these matters.

We could use the May meeting of the SD Working Group to exchange information on these and other health-related topics, and to discuss the Council’s overall approach to sustainable development issues during the U.S. Chairmanship.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

We intend to continue to emphasize the Council’s mandate concerning protection of the Arctic environment. Given the important work carried out in the four working groups under AEPS, it is time to address priority recommendations emerging from AMAP, CAFF, EPPR and PAME. We will be seeking to make substantial progress on the Arctic Council Action Plan to Eliminate Pollution of the Arctic (ACAP), the Regional Program of Action for the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities (RP A), CAFF’s strategic plan and EPPR’s work plan, among other issues.

The U.S. delegations to the working groups will be led by the following officials: Mr. Alan Thomas, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (AMAP); Ms. Janet Hohn, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior (CAFF); Ms. Ann Heinrich, U.S. Department of Energy, and Commander Scott Newsham, U.S. Coast Guard (EPPR); and Mr. Thomas Laughlin, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (PAME).

The United States will continue to develop the project concerning PCB phase-out in Russia, and we hope for meaningful progress in reducing discharges, emissions and loss of POPs. The United States is also looking at additional activities that may include expanded efforts to monitor and assess climate change in the Arctic, to develop special supporting studies involving contaminants in the Arctic environment, and to reduce mercury pollution in the Arctic region.

We should all be looking at ways to improve coordination and communication between working groups in order to avoid overlap and duplication, and promote effectiveness. The United States is interested in discussing mechanisms to address this emerging issue. One possibility would be to have the various working group Chairs meet during or following SAO meetings to coordinate their programs and efforts, although we are aware of potential scheduling difficulties with this proposal.
Finally, we hope to use appropriate occasions to brief the Council on some of the environmental protection work already being conducted by the United States on a bilateral or multilateral basis in the Arctic region, especially in Russia, consistent with the Council's role of serving as a high-level forum for information exchange on such matters. We would welcome similar presentations by others.

EDUCATION, OUTREACH AND COORDINATION

We attach high priority to the Council's mandate to encourage education and public awareness of Arctic-related matters, and are beginning to consider a public affairs strategy. As a start, I would strongly encourage you to post information concerning your country's Arctic-related activities, especially major upcoming meetings and events, on the Council's Internet website (http://arctic-council.usgs.gov).

We wish to be supportive of the University of the Arctic. We propose looking at ways to raise the University's profile in appropriate fora. We would also like to engage students at the secondary and primary level in protection of the Arctic environment. One mechanism for doing this is GLOBE, the "Global Learning and Observation to Benefit the Environment" program. Established by Vice President Gore in 1994, GLOBE is an exciting hands-on, school-based international environmental science and education program that unites students and teachers with scientists from around the world in making important scientific measurements and studying the environment. Virtually all Arctic Council member states are partners in the GLOBE Program, and we could consider expanding our existing GLOBE activity to include an Arctic environmental focus. (Further information on the GLOBE Program is available on the Internet at: http://www.globe.gov.)

Consistent with Paragraph 30 of the Iqaluit Declaration, the United States believes it is important to pursue better coordination between the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers. Our initial suggestion is to request that the Barents Council and Nordic Council each designate for upcoming meetings a member state that is also a member of the Arctic Council to serve as its rapporteur and, if necessary, spokesman within the Arctic Council on matters of mutual interest. Every effort should be made, including by the Chair, to bring to the attention of the Barents and Nordic Councils initiatives which might fall within the purview of those bodies. We will also encourage region-to-region contact, of the sort which has developed between Alaska and the Russian Far East under the auspices of the Northern Forum.

CALENDAR

As suggested above, we propose that the Sustainable Development Working Group meet in Anchorage, Alaska on May 3-4, immediately prior to the first SAO
meeting, to review progress on the sustainable development projects initiated in Iqaluit, continue discussions focused on health issues, and consider how to proceed on SD issues over the next two years. Please let me know your reaction to this proposal as soon as possible.

Our intention is to hold the first SAO meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, during the first week in May (May 5-6), 1999. If these dates are acceptable to you, we will begin to plan accordingly -- please let me know by January 1. As to long-term planning, we anticipate holding further SAO meetings in October 1999, April 2000, and again in late September or early October of 2000, immediately prior to the Ministerial in Alaska.

In addition, I would be grateful if Working Group Chairs would send me a calendar of the meetings they expect to hold between now and September 2000.

CONTACT INFORMATION

My contact information is listed below. In addition, we have established an e-mail address for purposes of Arctic Council Secretariat communications. However, we are still experiencing some technical difficulties with this site, so please phone or fax me or Tracy Hall (Tel. 202-647-4972) if you want to confirm that your communication has been received. The Arctic Council Secretariat e-mail address is: arctic@state.gov.

I greatly look forward to working with you over the next two years, and to hearing your reactions to these proposals.

Sincerely,

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Senior Arctic Official

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