

# SEARCH AND RESCUE COOPERATION

## IN THE ARCTIC

Traffic in the Arctic is increasing, both at sea and in the air – and with it the risk for accidents. Cooperation is key to providing rapid assistance during emergencies. The Arctic States therefore have signed a legally binding agreement on search and rescue in the Arctic.

Harsh conditions and sparsely populated areas can pose significant challenges for search and rescue operations in the high North – putting lives and the environment at risk. The Arctic States recognized that cooperation was key to provide rapid assistance to persons in distress and signed the first legally binding agreement negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council in 2011: *The Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic*.

The Agreement's objective is to strengthen aeronautical and maritime search and rescue cooperation and coordination in the Arctic. The Arctic States have agreed to:

- promote the establishment, operation and maintenance of adequate and effective search and rescue capabilities within their territories;
- provide means for effective communication in case of an emergency, including updated information about national authorities, agencies, and rescue coordination centers;
- take urgent steps to provide assistance to any person in distress – regardless of nationality, status of the person or the circumstances it finds itself in, including forwarding all available information to parties concerned, and requesting assistance for the operation;
- establish procedures of requesting permission to enter another state's national territory for the purpose of a search and rescue operation;
- exchange information that can improve the effectiveness of search and rescue operations, such as communication details, real-time forecasts and warnings, and lists of available airfields, ports, and refueling capabilities;
- meet on a regular basis in order to consider and resolve issues regarding cooperation in practice.

### Arctic Council Activities

The Arctic Council's Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group (EPPR) supports and implements the Agreement on Co-operation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR).

EPPR's SAR Expert Group acts as a facilitator for high-level, intergovernmental cooperation on Arctic SAR issues. Its specific goal is to identify lessons from Arctic incidents and exercises, to be active in relevant international fora, and to participate in SAR exercises in order to keep a finger on the pulse of state-of-the-art SAR work.

“We are going to work towards the full implementation of the Search and Rescue Agreement, ensuring that we are in the best position – not for if something happens in the Arctic but when it happens.”

*Benjamin Strong,  
EPPR SAR EG Chair*

Case study:

## EPPR looks into the VIKING SKY incident

At 14:00 GMT on 23 March 2019, the cruise vessel VIKING SKY called mayday as it lost power off the coast of Southern Norway. Unable to restart any of its four engines, the ship lay adrift in Hustadvika, an area known for its shallow waters and breaking sea. The wind was strong and pushed the cruise liner with more than 1370 passengers and crew members on board towards land. The Joint Rescue Coordination Center of Southern Norway quickly realized: This could turn into a mass rescue operation – and it did. The rescue mission completed 30 helicopter loads in 18 hours, airlifting almost 500 people, making it the largest public-private helicopter rescue in Norwegian history.

Despite the more favorable rescue conditions available in Southern Norway, the VIKING SKY incident holds valuable insights for possible emergencies in the Arctic.



*“Had a similar disaster happened in most other places in the Arctic the result would most likely have been catastrophic.”*

*Jens Peter Holst-Andersen, EPPR Chair*

The Chair of the Council’s Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group (EPPR), Peter Holst-Andersen, does not hesitate calling the VIKING SKY incident a warning about what to expect in the Arctic.

“No one would have had sufficient resources to react so effectively and promptly in the high North. This is why it is so extremely important that we work and cooperate cross-state on these issues”, says Peter Holst-Andersen. EPPR therefore held a workshop on the VIKING SKY incident with the authorities involved in the rescue operation to discuss lessons learned and pave the way forward for efficient rescue operations in Arctic waters.



Read the *The Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic*.

[arctic-council.org/saragreement](http://arctic-council.org/saragreement)



Published March 2020



For more information:

Jens Peter Holst-Andersen, EPPR Chair  
[jpg@fmn.dk](mailto:jpg@fmn.dk)

Benjamin Strong, SAR EG Chair  
[Benjamin.m.strong@uscg.mil](mailto:Benjamin.m.strong@uscg.mil)

[eppr.org](http://eppr.org)