

[Main](#) » [Meetings](#) » [Senior Arctic Officials](#) » [Senior Arctic Officials Meeting 1999, Anchorage, Alaska](#) » [Photographs and Text of Governor Knowles' Address](#) » **Governor Knowles Addresses the SD Working Group**

Alaska Gov. Tony Knowles
Welcoming Remarks - Arctic Council
May 4, 1999, Egan Convention Center, Anchorage, Alaska

Good morning. It's an honor to welcome such a distinguished collection of diplomats and international dignitaries to Alaska. I know my fellow Alaskans here join me in extending to you our warmest Alaskan hospitality during this first-ever meeting of the Arctic Council in our state, and in our nation.

As fellow northerners, we celebrate this important event, but also the emergence of spring after that longest of seasons we all share in common. All across the Arctic, as the sun remains bright well into the night, I know the residents of each of our nations are retiring our parkas, preparing our gardens and readying our fishing gear.

What an appropriate time to come together in Alaska's largest city - to rekindle our connections; to meet in the spirit of neighborly warmth; to consider our future as northerners working together to make better the lives of our citizens.

The existence of the Arctic Council certainly recognizes that everyone here are neighbors. Alaska shares a common border with our neighbors to the east, in Canada. To the west, less than three miles away at the closest point, are our neighbors in Russia. To the north, just over the top of the world, are our European neighbors in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Greenland and Iceland.

And certainly we are neighbors as well as members of the Council's permanent participants: the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Saami Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and the Aleut International Association.

As we gather this week to discuss the many areas of common interest and advance the Council's goals, it is no secret many of us are experiencing common problems in our nations.

As we come to terms with our problems here in Alaska, there's hardly any country in the world that has been left unscathed by recent economic turmoil. The new globalization often means that if a neighbor has problems, so does the neighborhood. Our charge is to let us be agents of change - to ensure that the ripple of prosperity is extended to all our citizens.

That's why the Arctic Council offers such promise - countries with common challenges meeting them through common solutions. So let me commend those of you in this room whose vision and energy helped give birth to this important organization, and whose commitment continue to make it productive.

The United States is a member of the Arctic Council because it has a single Arctic state - Alaska. Those of you from the American State Department can thank one of your visionary predecessors for that.

Despite considerable public ridicule about what was then termed his "icebox," U.S. Secretary of State William Seward purchased Alaska from Russia 132 years ago for the bargain basement price of 7.2 million dollars. Today, that's the value of about 10 hours of oil flowing through the trans-Alaska oil pipeline.

I know some of our Russian friends would like to renegotiate that deal. Many of our visitors from across the Bering Strait still enviously refer to Alaska as Russian-America.

So we Alaskans do take seriously our obligation to our nation and to the Arctic Council to fulfill our responsibility as a member of the international community.

That's why shortly after becoming Alaska's governor in 1994, I spelled out an approach to the basic issue of how to achieve sustainable development while protecting the environment. As you know, this is a fundamental issue facing the Arctic Council.

For me - and for most Alaskans - the choice isn't either-or. We believe that by doing development right, we can have good jobs and a growing, healthy economy and protect our environment.

As we look to a prosperous society in the new century, I believe it must be built on the understanding that economic and environmental policies are not confrontational but are joined. That in progress, each is dependent on the other. If you look around the world, you see the nations that fail to protect their environment are the ones with no jobs; no tax revenues to clean up or protect the land and water; no businesses willing or able to pay their fair share for environmental protection. These are the places where people are hungry for work and understandably willing to forsake the environment for themselves and their families to scratch out a living.

We refuse to let that happen in Alaska. We must never let our economy weaken to the point that people are willing to turn against the environment as an expendable commodity. We must demonstrate to ourselves - and those who watch us in the Lower 48 states and around the world - that our environment is essential to our economic health.

Part of our common work here stems from the legacy of past contamination. The work of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program, the Russian PCB sites assessment project, and the core blood monitoring study all point to the need to plan and prevent.

We in Alaska call our approach to environmentally responsible development "doing development right." It's based on three simple principals:

- Sound science,
- Prudent management based on conservation, and
- A responsive public process.

That's been my administration's approach in each of the major so-called "environment vs. development" issues we've faced. And I believe that approach is the right one for our nation - and for the Arctic Council.

American President Teddy Roosevelt put it well nearly 90 years ago when he said: "The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the

next generation increased, and not impaired, in value."

That is my vision for Alaska. I know it's a vision we all share.

Environmentally responsible development, which produces good jobs and builds a growing economy, is one of the three areas of focus I commend to the Arctic Council during the United States' chairmanship over the next two years.

Responsible development provides us the resources necessary to address our other priorities - educating our children, keeping police on our streets, plowing the snow from our roads, caring for our elders and making the necessary investments to protect our environment.

One of those investments must be in better understanding the natural world which surrounds us. Development by any Arctic neighbor has the potential of affecting the entire Arctic neighborhood - whether from air-borne pollution, over-use of natural resources such as fisheries, or a massive oil spill like the Exxon Valdez, which affected about 1,300 miles of Alaska's coastline a decade ago. We simply lack the knowledge to determine the long-term impacts of this development on our regions, and on our citizens.

In Alaska, we're working with our neighbors on several fronts to establish the means to undertake this vital research. For example, on fisheries, we're working with Canada, our Pacific Northwest neighbor states and the American federal government to endow a \$200 million Pacific coast salmon conservation efforts, including scientific research, ecosystem monitoring, habitat protection and restoration and sound management of this vital natural resource.

Out on Alaska's far western coast, communities there have suffered poor fishing seasons for the past two years when salmon returns dropped to some of the lowest levels on record. Other species, from Steller sea lions to seabirds, also show signs of population distress.

The causes of this potential ecological downturn are the subject of considerable speculation, and increasing investigation. Scientists and local experts are gradually piecing together a better understanding of the Bering Sea ecosystem and the factors that affect it.

That's why we recently formed a Bering Sea Task Force - to look at what we know about what's happening in this frigid yet rich environment and map out ways to achieve a better understanding. One of the task force's recent recommendations is better coordination with international research groups, including the Arctic Council.

We're also seeking research funding from our own national government and propose developing a comprehensive research plan for this vital ocean resource.

It's ironic that across the world, the Arctic is often an energy storehouse, yet Arctic communities too often lack a sustainable source of local energy. We should be leading the way in providing affordable, sustainable energy, including coal bed methane, wind and conservation.

If science is to be our guide, I suggest that education is a common solution to problems identified by the Arctic Council. That's why the second area of focus I recommend for Arctic Council consideration is improving the status of children of the North. It means adequate

health care, with a particular focus on the tragedy of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and preventing and combating the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Each child who is abused is a potential member of a nation's criminal justice system, so that's why we must focus on prevention. Improving the status of children of the North also means assessing the impacts of environmental contaminants and behavioral practices on their health.

I understand both Canada and the United States, in conjunction with the other Arctic nations, have initiated projects to focus on these concerns, and our state staff will work closely with you to promote that agenda.

Delivery of health services around the Arctic poses a difficult challenge. Last September, the Arctic Council Ministers approved the Alaska-U.S. tele-medicine project as one of the Council's first sustainable development projects. We look forward to bringing together tele-health professionals from around the Arctic to discuss this growing field and the opportunities it provides to improve the health of our children.

As we do so, I urge the Council to consider this cutting-edge technology a model for our joint work in other areas. New information technology has helped to shrink time and distance, which can be enormous barriers across the expansive Arctic when it comes to the delivery of services, from education and medical care.

Finally, I urge the Council to address the unique needs and problems common to the rural and indigenous people of each of our nations. In Alaska, we are struggling with ways to preserve the subsistence way of life enjoyed for centuries by Native and rural Alaskans. Living in small and often isolated villages also presents special challenges when it comes to basic infrastructure, the cost and availability of energy, rural sanitation and economic opportunities.

I realize this agenda is ambitious. Yet I also realize we are up to it. We are people of the Arctic - tested by the toughest of elements; graced by the richest of bounties. As we prepare for the new millennium, let us look to the Alaska flag as a symbol of the opportunities we may face. The flag was designed by a young orphan Native child, Benny Benson, and features the stars of gold on a blue background, led by the Great North Star. As war rages in another part of our world, may that Great North Star serve as a beacon bright in our part of the world for tolerance, understanding and sustainable development.

Thank you for your service on behalf of the citizens of your nations. And thank you for joining us here in Alaska.