

U.S. Readies “Aggressive” Arctic Council Agenda

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Admiral Robert Papp, appointed as U.S. special representative for the Arctic on 16 July, has seen climate change firsthand.

At a 6 November meeting of the Polar Research Board (PRB) of the National Academies, in Washington, D. C., Papp contrasted his 1976 visit to Alaska—when there was so much ice that his ship could not get through the Bering Strait—with a 2010 trip when “I could see ice nowhere, with the exception of ice in the ice water beside my [helicopter] seat.”

This “new normal” is providing opportunities for economic development, natural resources exploitation, and increased marine traffic, according to Papp, a former Coast Guard Commandant who is leading efforts to advance U.S. interests in the Arctic region. However, he noted that the new normal also is presenting dramatic environmental challenges and bringing big changes to Alaskans.

With the United States set to take over the rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council for 2 years beginning in April 2015, Papp laid out the country’s proposed Arctic Council agenda at the PRB meeting.

The U.S. agenda, which was first introduced during a 22–23 October meeting of the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum for Arctic governments and people, includes three proposed organizational thematic areas: addressing the impacts of climate change in the Arctic, advocating stewardship of the Arctic Ocean, and improving economic and living conditions. The United States currently is negotiating the proposed agenda with the other seven Arctic Council member countries to gain consensus and acceptance of it.

“We only have 2 years in the chairmanship [of the council], so we have set a rather aggressive agenda,” Papp said.

Proposed Actions

Proposed actions within the climate change theme include addressing Arctic climate adaptation and resilience, looking at short-lived climate pollutants, and enhancing Arctic climate science. Papp said the United States is going to use the “bully pulpit of the Arctic Council” to advocate for getting good science on black carbon and methane. “We know that what happens in the Arctic just doesn’t stay in the Arctic, and what happens in the rest of the world doesn’t just stay in the rest of the world,” he added. “They are symbiotic, and we need to find the causes and effects and see if there are things we can do to mitigate the continuing climate change. But most important, we have to find ways to adapt to changes already occurring.”

Proposed stewardship activities focus on areas including marine environmental protection, Arctic Ocean acidification, and search

and rescue exercises. The theme of improving economic and living conditions would include renewable energy demonstrations and focuses on freshwater security and renewable energy demonstrations. For this theme, Papp said that the United States would leverage the Arctic Economic Council, which Canada developed during its current chairmanship of the Arctic Council, to help drive investment toward people living in the Arctic.

Some Alaskans have urged Papp and others to be more focused on the need for economic opportunities. A 6 October letter to Papp from the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission stated that although a number of proposals, including calls for improved sanitation and suicide prevention efforts, are welcome, “we are very concerned that our number one priority, jobs and economic opportunity for Arctic residents, is being ignored.”

During his PRB presentation, Papp also focused on the need to find and focus on a “national imperative” to elevate the awareness of Arctic issues within the United States and to convince Americans, and not just Alaskans, that the United States is an Arctic nation and that concerns related to the Arctic affect the entire nation. He commented that previous national imperatives that brought focus to Alaska have included national defense and oil spill prevention efforts, and he noted that the impacts from climate change could be a national imperative as well.

Papp said that another challenge related to the Arctic Council is the United States’ relationship with Russia, which includes issues related to the Ukraine and Russian dual use facilities being built along the northern sea route. “Right now we have a little bit of stability. There have been no further challenges and problems in the Ukraine, at least as of today, and we continue to make our public statements and our policies well known,” he

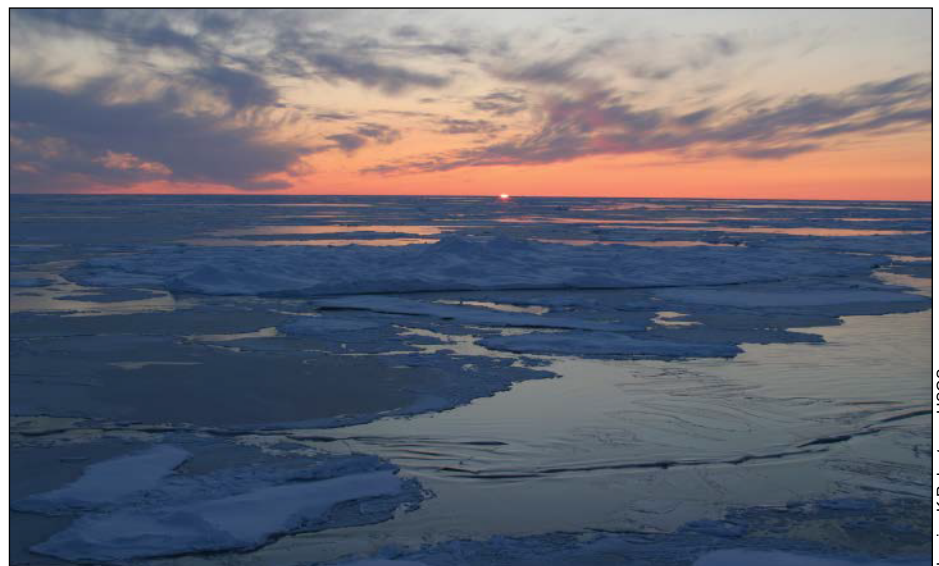
said. The policy of the White House and the Department of State is “that the Arctic is strategically important enough [with] the environmental sensitivity and everything else. We need to keep those conversations going because we need consensus of all eight [Arctic Council] countries, and we need to keep Russia engaged there. I believe there is a willingness on their part to do that.”

Juggling Complex Issues

Several experts at the meeting applauded Papp’s efforts but said that he has his work cut out for him.

Papp is a statesman who “has to thread a lot of needles, and that requires different skills than just doing science,” PRB member Waleed Abdalati told *Eos*. Abdalati, a professor of geography and the director of the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (a joint institute of the University of Colorado Boulder and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), has also served as NASA’s chief scientist. Papp “is juggling some pretty complex issues and has to live in a world of nuance,” he said. “Hopefully we can combine his nuance with what the [science] community produces and understands and bring science forward in an appropriate way at the table.”

PRB member Brendan Kelly, who recently stepped down as assistant director for polar sciences at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, told *Eos* that it is important to keep in mind that only part of Papp’s portfolio involves dealing with the upcoming U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council. “People tend to overemphasize our chairmanship as though this was really some opportunity to make some earth-shaking changes,” said Kelly, who is director of conservation research and chief scientist at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. “It will be incremental for sure, and so we should pay attention to it, but we shouldn’t get so focused on the next



Sunset over the Arctic Ocean.

Jessica K. Robertson, USGS

2 years [of U.S. chairmanship] that we are not thinking about the third and fourth year and beyond.”

“What I heard [at today’s meeting] is that he has tremendous pull from all kinds of directions about what the economic opportunities are, what the environmental threats are, what the national security challenges and opportunities are by a diminishing sea ice environment in particular,” Kelly added. “I’m hoping he will have heard our suggestion that there really is a clear imperative, and it really isn’t about many of these distractions. It’s really about the global significance of very rapid loss of land ice and sea ice,” Kelly said, noting the impact of that ice loss on sea level and global circulation patterns affecting weather. “This is the imperative as I see it, and I am hoping he’ll be able to articulate that and recognize that he’s in a unique position to lead on that.”

Communicating the Importance of Alaska

PRB chair Julie Brigham-Grette told *Eos* that Papp’s biggest challenge will be communicat-

ing the importance of the Arctic to Americans living outside of Alaska. Brigham-Grette, a professor in the Department of Geosciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said that the polar vortex becoming part of the lexicon in the lower 48 states is just the beginning of getting people to understand what is happening in the Arctic.

“To me, the big elephant in the room is sea level rise. That’s going to affect so many

tremendous.” She said that Papp will also need to balance the environment and economic development agendas in a region with less ice. “Obviously, we have to convince people that economic development doesn’t have to mean extraction of fossil fuels. There are other kinds of economic development. We need to just leave that stuff under the ocean.”

U.S. Arctic Research Commission Executive Director John Farrell told *Eos*, “As the former commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, and now [U.S. Secretary of State] Kerry’s special representative for the Arctic, Admiral Papp has the bully pulpit to bring attention to the North, to make more Americans aware of the fact that they live in an Arctic nation, by virtue of Alaska, and to remind them of their responsibilities, obligations, and opportunities there.”

Noting that U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt coined the term “bully pulpit,” Farrell, who was at the PRB meeting, said that “it will be interesting to see if Papp embraces that president’s philosophy of conservation, in that it ‘means development as much as it does protection,’ as Roosevelt said.”

—RANDY SHOWSTACK, Staff Writer



Admiral Robert Papp at a recent meeting in Iceland.

people,” Brigham-Grette said. “That may be the big agenda item that [Papp] needs to push, and we need to give him the information to understand that the cost of doing nothing is