



Highlights of [GAO-10-870](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The retreat of Arctic sea ice combined with expected increasing human activity in the area—in shipping traffic and oil and gas exploration—has increased the strategic interest that the United States and other nations have in the Arctic. As a result, the Coast Guard is expected to acquire increased responsibilities in the region. GAO was asked to examine the extent to which the Coast Guard is:

(1) coordinating with stakeholders on Arctic issues and operations and what, if any, further opportunities exist to enhance coordination; (2) taking action to identify requirements for future Arctic operations; and (3) taking steps to identify and mitigate challenges to meet current and future Arctic requirements. GAO reviewed Coast Guard documents that described efforts to plan for increased Arctic activity. GAO conducted a site visit to Alaska and interviewed federal officials, Alaska state officials, Alaska Native stakeholders, as well as private or nonprofit organizations representing Arctic interests. These observations are not generalizable, but provided insights on Coast Guard activities and actions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Coast Guard communicate with key stakeholders on the process and progress of its Arctic planning efforts. DHS concurred with our recommendation.

View [GAO-10-870](#) or [key components](#).
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COAST GUARD

Efforts to Identify Arctic Requirements Are Ongoing, but More Communication about Agency Planning Efforts Would Be Beneficial

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard coordinates with an array of stakeholders—foreign, federal, state, and local governments; Alaska Native interest groups; and private and nonprofit entities—on Arctic policy and operational issues, but some stakeholders want more information on the agency's Arctic planning efforts. Many local and Alaska Native officials praised the Coast Guard's coordination efforts on its summer Arctic operations, for example. However, 9 of the 15 state and local officials GAO met with wanted more information on the status and results of the Coast Guard's efforts to develop its future Arctic requirements. For example, some state and local officials believed that the agency had already determined its plan for Arctic operations but had not shared it, and one state official reported that his office and others may be willing to invest in infrastructure that could benefit the Coast Guard if and when they know the agency's plans. Coast Guard officials told us that they have been focused on communication with congressional and federal stakeholders and intend to share Arctic plans with other stakeholders once determined. In the interim, some state and local stakeholders reported having limited information that they believe would be useful on the process and progress of the agency's Arctic planning efforts. As a result, the Coast Guard could be missing an opportunity to create shared expectations and report on its progress with stakeholders central to future Arctic operations.

The Coast Guard has taken specific action to identify Arctic requirements and gaps while also collecting relevant information from routine operations. The High Latitude Study is the centerpiece of the agency's efforts to determine its Arctic requirements. The Coast Guard has also established temporary operating locations in the Arctic and conducted biweekly Arctic overflights to obtain more information on the Arctic operating environment. In addition, information gathered during the Coast Guard's routine missions—ice breaking, search and rescue, and others—also informs requirements. The agency's preliminary efforts to identify its Arctic requirements generally align with key practices for agencies defining missions and desired outcomes.

The Coast Guard faces Arctic challenges including limited information, minimal assets and infrastructure, personnel issues, and difficult planning and funding decisions, but is taking initial steps to address these challenges. Specifically, the Coast Guard does not currently have Arctic maritime domain awareness—a full understanding of variables that could affect the security, safety, economy, or environment in the Arctic—but is acquiring additional Arctic vessel tracking data, among other things, to address this issue. In addition, the Coast Guard's Arctic assets and infrastructure are limited and not suitable for the harsh environment, but the agency is testing equipment and using alternative options to mitigate gaps. Finally, the Coast Guard faces uncertainty over the timing of predicted environmental changes in the Arctic, as well as over future funding streams. To address these challenges the Coast Guard obtains scientific data on Arctic climate change and is studying its Arctic resource requirements to support potential future funding needs.