

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent changes in the Arctic from a warming climate, such as decreased sea ice coverage making marine areas more accessible, have increased global attention to the region's economic opportunities. In 1996, the eight Arctic States—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States—formed the Arctic Council to promote cooperation on various Arctic issues with input from indigenous groups. U.S. Arctic policy highlights the importance of the Council to pursue U.S. Arctic interests.

GAO was asked to examine matters related to U.S. Council participation. This report examines (1) the Council's organization and how it addresses environmental and economic development issues; (2) how key U.S. agencies participate in the Council and any challenges; and (3) agencies' actions to implement and manage voluntary Council recommendations and any challenges. GAO analyzed key documents; interviewed federal and other Arctic stakeholders; attended a Council meeting; and visited four Alaskan Arctic communities selected for their sizes and needs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State work with relevant agencies to develop a strategy identifying direction for agency Council participation and resource needs; develop a process to review and track progress on recommendations; and work with other Arctic States to develop guidelines for clear and prioritized recommendations. State agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-14-435](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

ARCTIC ISSUES

Better Direction and Management of Voluntary Recommendations Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation

What GAO Found

The Arctic Council (Council) is a voluntary intergovernmental forum for Arctic States, with involvement of indigenous organizations and other stakeholders, to address various environmental and economic issues through projects and reports targeting a variety of subjects. The eight Arctic States guide the work of the Council through consensus decisions and rotate the chairmanship of the Council every 2 years. The United States will assume the chairmanship in 2015. The participants meet in six working groups, four task forces, and various expert groups to produce such documents as scientific assessments and guidance. For example, the Council has produced assessments of Arctic climate change impacts and shipping. As Arctic issues have emerged, the Council has expanded and broadened its work to address them. For example, since the Council's was established in 1996, the number of ongoing projects has increased from about 30 to 80.

Six key federal agencies hold leadership roles in the Arctic Council and other agencies participate through the Council's working groups and task forces. The U.S. Department of State (State) leads this participation and collaborates with the five other key agencies that lead the delegations to Council working groups—the Environmental Protection Agency, National Nuclear Security Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Global Change Research Program—as well as other federal agencies with Arctic interests. In collaborating on Council work, the agencies face challenges by not having a clear direction or specific resources for their work. For example, key agency officials said that the agencies do not have a strategy that guides and aligns their Council work. Without a clear direction or specific resources for the collaborative effort, the agencies face challenges prioritizing the work, delivering unified messages to other Arctic States, and consistently participating in the Council. GAO previously reported that agencies can enhance and sustain collaborative efforts by engaging in various practices, such as establishing joint strategies and identifying necessary resources.

Federal agencies have acted on some voluntary recommendations that the United States and other Arctic States have adopted through the Council. However, State does not review or track progress made on these actions and faces challenges implementing the voluntary recommendations. Specifically, State informally discusses the recommendations with other agencies during monthly meetings but does not have a process to review and track progress the agencies have made toward implementing them. State officials said that the agency may need to more formally assess such progress because, without such a process, State does not know the status of recommendation implementation and faces challenges planning for and prioritizing future actions to address Arctic issues. In addition, the United States—with State as the lead agency—and other Arctic States face challenges implementing the Council's broad and numerous recommendations. To address these challenges, State officials said that the Council needs to more clearly specify and prioritize recommendations, but the Council does not have guidelines for doing so. Without such guidelines, officials said the recommendations have not historically produced actions with measurable outcomes.