

The White House

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FACT SHEET: White House Announces Actions to Protect Natural and Cultural Resources in Alaskan Arctic Ocean

Since taking office, President Obama has worked to protect the Arctic's natural and cultural resources and the communities that rely upon them through the use of science-based decision making, enhanced coordination of Federal Arctic management, efforts to combat illegal fishing, and revitalization of the process for establishing new marine sanctuaries. Building on this effort, today, President Obama is announcing new steps to enhance the resilience of the Alaskan Arctic environment and the sustainability of Alaskan native communities with the creation of the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area.

In addition to today's protections, the Obama Administration is announcing approximately \$30 million in philanthropic commitments for projects in rural northern Alaska and Canada. These projects include investments over the next three years related to shipping, ecosystem science, community and ecological resilience, and tribal engagement. Earlier this week, the Department of Commerce **deployed** an Economic Development Assessment Team to Nome, Alaska to help the region diversify, grow its economy, and address challenges related to climate change and community resilience.

Today's actions are also supportive of the March 2016 U.S.-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy, and Arctic Leadership and make substantial progress on its objectives of conserving Arctic biodiversity through science-based decision-making, incorporating indigenous science and traditional knowledge into decision-making, and supporting strong Arctic communities. These actions employ science-based leadership to improve marine and coastal resilience and sustain our Nation's precious natural resources.

Executive Order Creating the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area

Native villages in the northern Bering Sea region of Alaska largely practice a subsistence-based lifestyle that is inextricably tied to the rich marine ecosystem of the Bering Sea. Warming ocean temperatures, sea ice loss, and increasing ship traffic all

threaten the subsistence practices and food security of these communities. The coastal tribes along the northern Bering Sea and the Bering Strait have requested that the Federal Government take action to protect the health of the marine ecosystems of the Northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait while maintaining opportunities for sustainable fishing and sustainable economic development.

In direct response to these requests, the President signed an Executive Order creating the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area. This area, encompassing 112,300 square miles, represents a hugely productive, high-latitude ocean ecosystem and supports one of the largest seasonal marine mammal migrations in the world, including thousands of bowhead and beluga whales, hundreds of thousands of walrus and ice seals, and millions of migratory birds. It is home to more than 40 tribes of coastal Yup'ik and Inupiaq peoples whose way of life has been linked with the marine environment for thousands of years.

The Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area is delineated for the purpose of focusing a locally-tailored collection of protections related to oil and gas, shipping, and fishing. The order also establishes a Task Force charged with coordinating Federal activities in this area to enhance ecosystem and community resilience, conserve natural resources, and protect the cultural and subsistence values this ecosystem provides for Alaskan native communities. Further, agencies are directed to consider traditional knowledge in decision making and establish a formal consultative mechanism for engaging with regional tribal governments to seek their input on Federal activities. This action advances science-based decision-making and engagement with Alaska Native peoples in addressing the changing Arctic consistent with the Joint Statement signed at the White House Arctic Science Ministerial and consultation with Alaska Natives in preparation for the **Ministerial**.

Shipping

In recognition of the increase in shipping through the Bering Strait, the Coast Guard is nearing completion of a Port Access Route Study (PARS) for the region. A PARS is the first step in assessing the need for vessel traffic control measures and developing a set of recommendations. Any recommended international routing measures would be submitted to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) which sets international rules for maritime commerce. The Executive Order directs the Coast Guard to give careful consideration to community recommendations regarding environmentally sensitive Areas to Be Avoided (ATBAs) and to publish its initial findings by the end of

2016 and to move its conclusions to the International Maritime Organization for action by 2018.

Fishing

Sea bottom habitat is extremely important to the ecosystem in the Northern Bering Sea and helps to support the incredible abundance of marine mammals and sea birds in the region, including critical subsistence resources. In recognition of these connections, bottom trawling is already banned in the region to protect the sea floor. The Executive Order makes it Federal policy to support the continued prohibition on bottom trawling, which destroys sensitive benthic ecosystems.

Oil and Gas

Under the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, the President has withdrawn Norton Basin planning area and portions of the St. Matthew-Hall planning area from future oil and gas leasing to further protect the regional ecosystem and coastal communities. The five year leasing plans issued by the Department of the Interior do not include plans for leasing in the withdrawn areas, so there will not need to be changes to those plans to reflect the withdrawal. The total area withdrawn from leasing through this Executive Order is 40,300 square miles.

Coordination and Consultation

This Order also advances the Administration's priorities of elevating traditional knowledge in decision making and coordinating Federal efforts in the Arctic. Today's actions establish a Federal Task Force on the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area (Bering Task Force), under the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) established by Executive Order 13689. The Bering Task Force will coordinate Federal activity and consider additional mechanisms to reduce impacts to subsistence and cultural activities within the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area. The Executive Order also formally elevates the voice of Alaskan native tribes and the role of indigenous knowledge in decision-making within the region by mandating that the Task Force establish and engage in regular consultation with a Bering Intergovernmental Tribal Advisory Council, which will consist primarily of tribal government representatives with participation from Federal, state, and local officials for coordination purposes. Together, these two groups will guide the incorporation of valuable traditional knowledge and science into Federal resource management in the northern Bering Sea region, thus preserving this unique ecosystem and the indigenous peoples who rely upon it.

Commitments to Rural Northern Alaska and Canada

Today, in support of the U.S.-Canada commitments to a Shared Arctic Leadership model, the philanthropic community is pledging approximately \$30 million for projects in rural northern Alaska and Canada.

- The **Arctic Funders Collaborative (AFC)**, a group of eleven U.S., Canadian and international philanthropic foundations, is announcing that a subset of its members will coordinate and mobilize resources through grant programs across the Arctic at a projected \$27 million over the next three years in the following areas:
 - Community-led planning and monitoring initiatives that foster adaptation and resilience to a changing Arctic climate
 - Low-impact shipping corridors in Arctic Alaska and Canada, including routing and mitigation measures to help improve maritime safety and spill prevention
 - Northern-led policy development informed by indigenous knowledge and science
 - Fostering connections between Northern priorities and social finance institutions in ways that support culture, community resilience and sustainable economic opportunities
 - Building in-region capacity of indigenous-led organizations and emerging leaders across the ArcticPriority geographic areas for marine stewardship support include the northern Bering Sea and the Bering Strait, the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas, the Northwest Passage, Lancaster Sound, Baffin Bay, the Davis Strait, and Hudson Bay.
- Today, the **Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation** is announcing a \$3.7 million grant to support research that couples state-of-the-art geophysical observations from unmanned aerial systems with a community-engaged research approach to bridge scientific and indigenous understanding of sea ice change in the Alaskan Arctic. Led by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Columbia University, and Kotzebue residents, the project will research changing patterns of Arctic ice and other physical characteristics in Kotzebue Sound and the Chukchi Sea, using a combination of traditional knowledge and sensing technologies in modules carried by drones. From the beginning of the work - including development of the research design - the project will involve local experts who have sea ice experience and other environmental knowledge.