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Home > House hearing on U.S. Arctic policy discusses need for new icebreakers, stronger leadership

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The House Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation held a hearing on July 23 to discuss U.S. policy in the Arctic. Scientists and representatives from the military discussed the need for new icebreaker vessels and greater U.S. leadership in the Arctic.

In his opening statement, Chairman Duncan Hunter (R-CA) identified the need for a stronger U.S. presence in the Arctic, as melting ice reveals new resources, and navigable waters for the military to monitor. Ranking Member John Garamendi (D-CA) emphasized the geopolitical importance of an accessible and secure Arctic. Other Committee members cited the strategic importance of the Northern Sea Route, which allows ships to navigate the Arctic Ocean north of Russia and through the Bering Strait.

Witnesses from the Coast Guard and Navy explained the need for heavy icebreaker vessels in order to police activities in a more accessible Arctic. The only American icebreaker, the USCGC Polar Star, is already 7 years past its 30-year service lifespan. They also cited concerns that other nations—including non-Arctic nations like China—have invested in modern icebreaker fleets.

Witnesses from The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Science Foundation reiterated the need for icebreakers to support scientific research. The Committee called on the federal agencies to increase funding for new icebreaker vessels within their jurisdictions.

Witnesses and Committee members agreed that U.S. policy in the Arctic needs to be more robust, including the need to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which would ensure rights to resources in American continental shelf territory, and allow the U.S. legal recourse if a non-UNCLOS nation closes its sea lanes. Both parties expressed hope that the upcoming U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council for 2015-2017 could provide an opportunity for greater involvement in Arctic development.

Source: House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
