

January 25, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500-0005

Dear Mr. President:

Congratulations on your second inauguration. I enjoyed your inaugural address, during which you appropriately focused on the threat of climate change. As you said, while some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, none can avoid its devastating impact. The failure to respond to this challenge would indeed betray future generations.

I have long maintained that Alaska is at ground zero of climate change. We have seen the Arctic icepack reduced to a record small size, melting permafrost has buckled roads and foundations, increasing sea surges threaten to undercut entire coastal villages, and newly ice-free waters in the Arctic Ocean have opened the way for increased development for energy, marine shipping and even tourism.

During my first four years in office, I pursued legislation to address critical Arctic needs due to these changes: enhanced scientific research to better understand Arctic warming, address its peoples' unique health concerns, share revenues from offshore oil and gas development and address adaptation needs. I will reintroduce these bills in the 113th Congress in coming weeks.

One bill in my Arctic package I wanted to bring to your attention calls for appointment of an U.S. Ambassador to the Arctic. Because of these climatic changes, the Arctic Ocean is an emerging sphere of international interest which demands a heightened U.S. diplomatic presence to exercise national leadership and vision in Arctic policy.

Since 1996, the Arctic Council, an international forum composed of the eight nations with Arctic territory, has provided a place for developing shared policy goals among these nations. The Council has done a commendable job and assumed an increased role in recent years, negotiating a multilateral agreement on search and rescue needs. It is now considering a similar agreement to address issues related to oil spill prevention and response.

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January 25, 2013

Page Two

Six Arctic nations—Russia and Norway among them—have named ambassador-level diplomats to represent their interests before the Arctic Council. Non-Arctic nations also are taking a keen interest in this sphere, such as the People's Republic of China, and others are seeking formal observer standing before the Arctic Council. Even Singapore has named an ambassador to the Arctic, given its interests in international shipping.

I greatly appreciate the attention to Arctic issues by your Administration. Secretary Hillary Clinton's personal involvement in the Arctic Council process during your first term was unprecedented and it is no coincidence the council made the most progress on our nation's policy goals when the Secretary participated. Many other agencies in your Administration also have been active in Arctic issues, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Department of Interior, Council on Environmental Quality, and the United States Navy and Coast Guard.

Oceans Ambassador David Balton has been a strong and effective advocate on Arctic issues as has America's representative before the council, Senior Arctic Official Julie Gourley. I greatly appreciate these individuals and their efforts, but suggest the changes we see in the Arctic today now warrant taking the next step to heighten our diplomatic presence at the top of the globe with the appointment of a U.S. Ambassador to the Arctic.

I am pleased to work with your Administration to create this vital governance structure for American interests in a rapidly changing and increasingly important Arctic. I have enclosed a copy of my Arctic Ambassador legislation for your staff.

Thank you again for your leadership and interest in Arctic matters.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich
United States Senator