

## **USARC prepares recommendations on oil spill research in the Arctic Ocean and invites stakeholder comment**

ANCHORAGE, AK, March 1, 2010 - In response to a recent eight-nation assessment of Arctic shipping, and current debates in the U.S. regarding offshore oil exploration in the Arctic, the U.S. Arctic Research Commission (USARC) continues to push for greater research on oil spill response and prevention in Arctic waters. This month, the Commission has invited stakeholders to help develop a path forward to reinvigorate U.S. efforts in this area.

A Commission "white paper" urging expanded research coordination and funding has been posted at [www.arctic.gov/publications/usarc\\_oilspill\\_2-24-10.pdf](http://www.arctic.gov/publications/usarc_oilspill_2-24-10.pdf). A stakeholders meeting will discuss the USARC proposal and national research needs on March 5th, in the boardroom of the North Pacific Research Board, 1007 West Third Avenue, Suite 100. Presentations at this meeting are by invitation, due to space and time limitations, but time will be reserved at 11:00 am for public comment. Comments on the draft white paper can also be emailed to the Commission at [crossa@arctic.gov](mailto:crossa@arctic.gov), preferably before March 12th.

Before recommendations are finalized at a Commission meeting scheduled for March 15th, the Commission also plans to meet informally, on March 4th in Anchorage, with representatives of the Interagency Coordinating Committee on Oil Pollution Research (ICCOPR), which was established by Congress in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA90) after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. ICCOPR is chaired by the U.S. Coast Guard and oversees federally sponsored spill research nationwide.

In April, USARC will promote further discussions in Alaska on oil spill research. On April 20-22, scientists will meet in Anchorage for a workshop "National Resource Damage Assessment in Arctic Waters: The Dialogue Begins" ([www.crrc.unh.edu/workshops/nrda\\_arctic/index.html](http://www.crrc.unh.edu/workshops/nrda_arctic/index.html)). On April 21-23, USARC will co-sponsor a workshop on Arctic civil infrastructure at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), which will be led by representatives from the Institute of Northern Engineering at UAF, and from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory.

All four meetings are designed to encourage greater scientific and technical research on oil spills.

A primary task of the ICCOPR is to develop a national oil spill research plan. In previous communications, including Congressional testimony last fall ([www.arctic.gov/news.html](http://www.arctic.gov/news.html)), the Commission has urged the Coast Guard to convene ICCOPR more regularly and to focus on research issues in the Arctic. The resulting ICCOPR meetings are positive responses to USARC requests.

On February 12th, USARC Chair Mead Treadwell and Deputy Director Dr. Cheryl

Rosa met with the Advisory Board of the Prince William Sound Oil Spill Recovery Institute (OSRI) to express support for an expansion of the basic funding for OSRI's Arctic/Subarctic oil spill research programs that were sponsored by Alaska Senator Mark Begich in the pending Coast Guard Authorization bill.

The Commission helped lead the eight-nation Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, a report approved by the Arctic Council last year in Norway. At that meeting, Arctic Council Ministers committed to work across the Arctic to improve oil spill technology.

"We've heard from some who believe the capability to clean up oil in ice is adequate, and some who believe it is not. We've heard from everyone involved - industry, local governments, citizens and environmental groups - that improvement in both prevention and response would help us prepare for a more accessible Arctic Ocean," Treadwell said. "We believe the law calls for a more robust research program than we're getting right now, and we're glad the interagency committee in charge of this is gearing up."

In the draft paper, USARC's four summary recommendations to the White House and Congress are:

1. Globally, the risks of Arctic oil spills from shipping and from offshore oil and gas development are increasing. All Arctic coastal states, including the U.S., need to reinvigorate research into oil spills in ice-covered waters and to emphasize spill prevention and response. Bills recently introduced by Alaska's Senator Begich and by Congressman Don Young are important steps towards this goal, and should be supported.
2. Much of the funding authorized in OPA90 has expired, and to achieve its original goals, the Act needs to be refreshed, strengthened, and improved. Specifically:
  - a. Improved waiver provisions will enable testing of oil spills in U.S. waters. "Spills of opportunity" should be permitted to enable testing of new response techniques.
  - b. The Department of Justice should direct fines and penalties for oil spills to supporting scientific research.
  - c. ICCOPR's membership should be expanded to include OSRI, NOAA's Coastal Response Research Center, industry, state, local and academic members.
  - d. ICCOPR's work should be tied to the White House's National Science and Technology Council.

e. ICCOPR should update its research plan, meet regularly, transparently, and with stakeholders, and should designate a subcommittee that focuses on the Subarctic and Arctic.

3. Funding for oil spill research, that was authorized but not spent to levels called for in OPA90, needs to be increased significantly. The Commission recommends an annual budget of \$30-\$50M which could be collected from the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund if Congress authorizes this by annual appropriation, or by a built-in "endowment" approach such as the one currently used to fund research and oil tank upgrade/replacement work by OSRI and the Denali Commission. Of this total, \$8-\$10M should be directed to unique problems in the Arctic and Subarctic, including the need for additional baseline biological research in the Arctic Ocean. More research, development, and on-water experimentation of spill response is needed in ice-covered conditions. The Commission's draft white paper concludes that the scope of our national programs, as well as specific Arctic programs, fail to meet the expectations of OPA90, which projected over \$20 million in annual research funds for national programs.

4. OSRI's endowment funding should be increased to \$12M as intended in the Coast Guard authorization bill pending in the U.S. Senate.

The Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984 established USARC. This federal agency's principal duties are to develop and recommend an integrated national Arctic research policy and to assist in establishing a national Arctic Research Program Plan to implement the policy. Commissioners also facilitate cooperation between the federal government, state and local governments, and other nations with respect to Arctic research, both basic and applied. The U.S. conducts approximately \$400 million in Arctic research annually.

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