

## New Arctic Research Agreement Aims to Thaw Relations With Russia

By Adam Allington

Posted May 25, 2018, 3:55 PM

- Binding agreement among all eight Arctic nations signed
- Agreement would open up access for scientists, equipment, data sharing

A new agreement among Arctic states could speed research into climate change by improving cross-border access for scientists conducting research in the region.

The eight-member Arctic Council adopted the agreement on “Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation,” which aims to streamline the visa process for scientists, open greater access to research areas, and improve data sharing.

The binding agreement went into effect May 23 and was signed by Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S.

Combating climate change remains at the heart of the council’s agenda. But progress on that front has been hampered in recent years as relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated.

Russia controls the largest swath of territory among the eight Arctic nations and remains a partner for addressing climate change-related problems.

“We all expect that the agreement will clear the remaining obstacles to research cooperation and thus broaden everybody’s understanding of the Arctic,” said Aleksi Harkonen, who chairs the council for Finland during the two-year, rotating leadership period.

The agreement was the third that the Arctic Council has reached in its 20-year history. Previous agreements established cooperative relationships on search-and-rescue operations and oil-spill response.

### Improved Access to Russia

The agreement is considered by many observers to be a victory for scientific diplomacy, amid a broad range of geopolitical disagreements, including allegations of Russian meddling in U.S. elections.

“Fortunately, despite all of that, we still have a history of cooperation between U.S. and Russia with research in the Arctic,” said John Farrell, executive director of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission in Arlington, Va., which advises the president and Congress on Arctic research policy.

The history of cooperation between Arctic Council member states has become increasingly bureaucratic in recent years, Farrell told Bloomberg Environment May 24.

“Sometimes, Russia would deny access to its water and land resources, or slow-walk the approval of visas allowing researchers into the country,” he said. “Ideally, this agreement will help lower the administrative barriers, but the proof will be in the pudding.”

For its part, the Russian delegation to the Arctic Council said it’s ready to be an “active participant” in the agreement.

“This agreement facilitates scientific cooperation beyond national borders, and it paves the way for joint responses of the Arctic states to new challenges in the region caused by global climate change and increased human activity,” said Vladimir Barbin, senior arctic official for the Russian Federation and co-chairman of the task force that produced the agreement.

### **Arctic Being Transformed**

Rapid climate warming is transforming the far north, creating a variety of problems that cut across nearly all aspects of the council’s work.

Recent studies have shown how the dramatic reduction in sea ice and melting of the Greenland ice sheet are affecting weather patterns around the globe, as well as altering the ecology and economy of the polar north.

Despite the value of the agreement on scientific cooperation, however, some accuse the council of being too focused on creating reports and recommendations, and not fostering enough action.

“We need stronger governance and leadership from the council to address the urgency of the issues before us,” said Margaret Williams, U.S. managing director of the Arctic program at the World Wildlife Fund in Anchorage, Alaska, one of the designated council observers.

### **‘Needs to Be Stronger’**

Williams told Bloomberg Environment the council’s work to date has been too lax in terms of programs to actually address the threats of climate change.

“It’s all going in the right direction, but the council needs to be stronger in implementing the recommendations from all the reports it generates,” she said.

These days, U.S. participation on the council is increasingly at odds with the direction set by the White House. President Donald Trump has dismissed climate change as a hoax, and his administration has sought to cut funding for efforts to address it.

Federal scientists, however, aren't altering their messages to Congress or the White House based on politics, according to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission's Farrell.

"The U.S. government is still supporting scientific research on climate science, and the results of that research continue to be published in scientific journals," he said.

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