



Editorials

Breaking the ice on Arctic policy: enough heel-dragging



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Sea ice near Alaska (Steve Ringman/The Seattle Times)

In the Arctic, climate change is rechanneling commerce, international politics and national security. The United States needs a comprehensive Arctic policy before it falls further behind the rest of the world.

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ONE glaciologist says it's "disastrous." Glaciers across the Northwest have shrunk 25 to 40 percent over 30 years, [The Seattle Times' Sandi Doughton reported](#). Glaciers in the North Cascades are likely to lose 5 to 10 percent of their volume this year alone.

Consider the in-our-backyard transformation of the North Cascades and scale it to the Arctic. Along with reshaping geography, the "big melt" is rechanneling commerce, international politics and national security.

For a generation, the United States has done a lousy job planning for a navigable Arctic and the ripple effect of rising sea levels on indigenous nations. Today, it's a mad scramble to catch up with the rest of the industrialized world.

Earlier this month while visiting Alaska, [President Obama announced](#) that he would step up production of two year-round Coast Guard icebreakers. The United States only has two functional icebreakers, five fewer than it did 70 years ago. Russia has 40, with 11 more on the way.

The icebreaker gap is one piece of a larger mosaic. A 2014 [U.S. General Accountability Office report](#) recommends a much bolder U.S. Arctic strategy.

Congress and the Obama administration need to follow the recommendation of Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski and adopt a comprehensive Arctic strategy that incorporates everything from oil-spill response to additional aircraft. It's a position echoed by Washington U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Everett, who has pushed for the appointment of a U.S. ambassador at large for Arctic affairs.

A recent, encouraging sign was the president's announcement that the Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will work together to map the now-opened-up Chukchi, Beaufort and Bering seas. NOAA also plans to install monitoring equipment to chart rising sea levels — better late than never.

“It's time for the Obama administration to follow through

on a comprehensive Arctic policy.”

Today, the University of Washington, with its [Arctic studies program](#), is building the intellectual capital for a new generation of leaders to tackle the region’s governance challenges. The program bookends other interdisciplinary initiatives, such as the internationally acclaimed [UW Climate Impacts Group](#).

Enough heel-dragging. It’s time for the Obama administration to follow through on a comprehensive Arctic policy, and for Washington’s and Alaska’s congressional delegations to lead the charge.

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