

Statement of U.S. Senator Mark Begich
on Introduction of “Inuvikput” Arctic Legislative Package
Embargoed Until 2 p.m.; August 3, 2009

(Slide 1 – Alaska map)

Mr. President, I rise today for the first time on this floor to mark the 50th anniversary of Alaska statehood, and to draw the attention of my colleagues to an urgent issue that affects not only my state, but all our states – the issue of global climate change.

This year, thanks to actions taken in this very chamber, Alaska is celebrating its golden anniversary of statehood. Acquiring the rights and responsibilities of full citizenship was the culmination of a dream for citizens of the 49th state.

Statehood granted us the ability to exercise control over our vast natural resources and gave us a full voice in our national government. In the half century since, Alaska has grown from the nation’s largest supplier of salmon to become the nation’s storehouse of both seafood and energy.

Because of its strategic location near the top of the globe, Alaska plays a critical role in the nation’s defense. During the Cold War, the superpowers stared down each other across the frozen polar ice cap. Thanks to a thaw in the geopolitical climate, the Ice Curtain separating Alaska and Russia melted some 20 years ago.

Today, it is a change in the climate itself that present serious new challenges – and great opportunities – to my state and our nation. Alaska is now at Ground Zero for the effects of global climate change.

I take this opportunity today to detail how that is affecting the lives of Alaskans. I will describe a package of legislation I am introducing to prepare my state and the nation for the next 50 years.

During that time, the Arctic will play an even larger role in the nation’s commerce, foreign policy, and energy independence.

(Slide 2 – Portage Glacier)

Mr. President, to me there’s no more dramatic illustration of global warming in Alaska than these two pictures taken at Portage Glacier, just about 50 miles south of Anchorage.

This top photo, taken by my dad in 1970, shows me and two of my brothers and a sister. The glacier is clearly in view. The bottom photo was taken just 35 years later, in 2005. It’s of my son, Jacob, standing in the exact same spot.

The glacier is nowhere to be seen because it has dramatically receded due to global warming.

Today in the Arctic, the sea ice is melting so fast most of it could be gone in thirty years. You can clearly see it in this polar projection of the Arctic.

(Slide 3 – ice map)

The implications of that loss are enormous. Devastating for species such as the polar bear, walrus and seals, which depend on ice for their very survival.

Life-altering for Arctic residents who have depended on marine mammals for their nutritional and cultural needs for thousands of years. Literally earth-shattering for entire Alaskan Arctic communities, which are being wiped away by erosion and thawing permafrost.

When this global air conditioner is knocked off kilter, it accelerates climatic changes we are already witnessing around the globe that neither science nor our political systems can stop. Consider these examples.

(Slide 4 – eroding house)

Storms raging over waters that once were frozen solid but which are now ice-free for much of the year are eroding sections of the Alaska shoreline at rates of 45 feet per year or more. This undermines entire coastal villages like Shishmaref and Kivalina.

Thawing permafrost is causing roads and the foundations of homes to buckle. A recent study by the University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research estimated that the impacts of climate change will increase the cost of maintaining or replacing just today's public infrastructure in my state by 6 billion-dollars.

The potential release of massive amounts of methane now sealed in the permafrost threaten to accelerate the pace of climate change. That's known to scientists as "Arctic Feedback."

Warming water temperatures are pushing cold water species north and attracting warm water species from the south. Fishermen in Sitka are encountering the giant Humboldt squid from Mexico. Tuna – whose usual habitat favors the tropics – have been caught near Homer. And invasive species such as green crab are moving steadily northward.

Ocean acidification – the result of absorption of carbon into our marine waters – weakens shellfish, coral, and even plankton, the very first link of the marine food chain.

At the G-8 Summit earlier this month in Italy, developing nations agreed to the principle of limiting the average increase in the earth's temperature to no more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. In the American Arctic, we exceeded that long ago.

The diminishing ice creates opportunities in the Arctic, but even these pose new challenges. For example, the Beaufort and Chukchi seas are believed to contain almost twice as much oil as already has been produced from the North Slope.

Arctic oil and gas development has been conducted safely on-shore in Alaska. Alaskans have the technology to safely produce it off-shore, too. But subsistence users who rely on marine mammals for their way of life are legitimately concerned about the special challenges of how to prevent and respond to an oil spill in broken sea ice.

The diminishing Arctic ice pack could open new grounds to commercial fishing, which can create new jobs. This also presents challenges to manage fish stocks in this region as we learn more about the impact of fishing in these previously inaccessible waters.

Opening the Northwest Passage, the Northern Sea Route and eventually the polar sea, will bring an increase in shipping and even tourism to the Arctic. This means new economic development and additional jobs to the northern part of our state.

(Slide 5 – Russian flag)

Our neighbors have taken notice of the warming Arctic, too. This picture of a Russian submersible planting that country's flag on the North Pole's ocean floor were shocking to Americans and other Arctic nations.

The Swedish Foreign Minister, whose nation is president of the European Union this year, says the melting polar sea ice is creating revolutionary new transportation possibilities between the Atlantic and Pacific.

Although Alaskans are well aware of the impacts of climate change in our state, national decision makers are just starting to come to grips with its challenges and opportunities. A proposed American Arctic policy was adopted in the final days of the Bush administration. While not perfect, it highlights many areas that need further focus.

Here in the Congress, climate change has risen to a high priority in these halls and in the Obama administration.

(Slide 6 – Eskimo man on sea ice)

Mr. President, I commend these many initiatives and pledge my cooperation with other members of this body and the national administration. To advance that effort, today I am introducing a package of seven bills to address these challenges, almost all of which have been caused by, or made worse by, climate change.

I call this package - Inuvikput (ee-NEW-vik-put). It's a word from the Inupiaq Eskimos of the Alaska North Slope which means "the place where we live."

I can think of no more appropriate term – coming from the very people who are being affected every day by climatic changes in America's Arctic, the place they have called home for thousands of years.

Mr. President, my package starts with improving our fundamental understanding of the region. We need to invest in basic science to better understand Arctic oceanography, meteorology, biology of its fish and marine mammals, as well as natural resources and oil and gas potential.

We need a coordinated research plan. It should start with baseline observations and include better science supporting Arctic-specific oil spill prevention and response. This plan also must include local and traditional knowledge. After all, some of the first and most accurate predictions of Arctic climate change were from Native elders.

My bill calls on the Secretary of Commerce to undertake a comprehensive strategy to coordinate Arctic research, to make recommendations to Congress on a long-term Arctic Ocean research plan and to provide the resources for this vital mission. We also need to promote Pan-Arctic research, especially with our Russian and Canadian neighbors, to address scientific issues that span international borders.

My second bill would provide the United States equal standing with other Arctic nations when it comes to our participation in the international Arctic Council and other forums.

Other leading Arctic nations – Russia, Canada, Norway – are represented by ambassador-level diplomats on the Council.

I appreciate the dedication of those who have represented us before the Arctic Council and other forums. I also thank Secretary Clinton and other high level diplomats for their interest in the Arctic. But the United States needs a permanent representative on an equal footing with the representatives of other nations in these important forums.

Our ambassador should advocate American interests in science, sustainable development, transportation and our defense posture.

(Slide 7 – ships in ice)

The third piece of legislation deals with preparedness for the coming expanded use of the Arctic. We must increase our investment in basic infrastructure to maintain a permanent presence in the Arctic, for scientific, economic development and national security missions.

Critical to that is the need to replace our fleet of icebreakers. The *Polar Sea* and the currently idled *Polar Star* have both served beyond their 30-year life. The *Healy* is newer, but designed primarily for scientific research.

That scientific mission is important. But we need an icebreaking fleet to assert our national interests by patrolling our Arctic waters, monitor increased traffic, and respond to search and rescues, oil spills and other incidents.

In addition to their life-saving mission, the Coast Guard is a vital partner with Alaska's commercial fishing industry. This 4-billion-dollar industry is one of our nation's truly American industries, providing 58,000 jobs.

Our Coast Guard needs facilities to serve as a base for aerial surveillance, spill prevention and emergency response capabilities in the Arctic. Currently, our closest Coast Guard air base is located in Kodiak, a 900-mile commute just to reach the Arctic Coast. That's like patrolling the Gulf of Mexico from air bases in New York.

I applaud the stamina of our Coast Guard crews who've kept our C-130s in the Arctic skies by performing maintenance work on the ramp in sub-freezing conditions. The least we could do is provide them with a heated hangar. My legislation would address that need and other critical needs.

Fourth, we must achieve a balance in environmentally responsible resource development in the Arctic. A diminished ice cap may clear the way for more affordable development of the enormous energy reserves the U.S. Geological Service says lie beneath Arctic waters.

This region contains an estimated 30 billion barrels of oil and 220 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. These resources can create thousands of American jobs and help assure our national energy security.

We must get the science right and provide the infrastructure necessary to protect human and animal life and the environment. To help achieve that, my measure calls on the Coast Guard to assess Arctic development and develop the necessary infrastructure. It also requires the Secretary of Commerce to direct research to prevent and improve oil spill recovery in Arctic waters.

(Slide 8 – Arctic oil development)

My fifth bill deals with the benefits of energy development in the Arctic. Most Alaskans support oil and gas exploration in the Outer Continental Shelf and can do development there in right way, as shown here.

Another example is BP's Liberty field, located off Alaska's northern coast. To minimize impacts, directional drilling from this island pad can tap oil reserves eight miles away.

As a part of this package, my bill extends to Alaskans the same share of federal revenues that residents of the Gulf States currently receive.

It would direct a portion of those revenues to those most affected - the residents of Alaska's North Slope - where communities have depended on marine mammals from these same waters for thousands of years. I believe the Arctic's resources belong to the people of the Arctic and should be shared among them.

(Slide 8 – Eskimos in skin boat)

My sixth bill deals with a critical omission from the new presidential directive on the Arctic – addressing the health problems of Arctic people. Alaskans and others who live in Northern latitudes experience numerous health problems, including higher rates of alcohol abuse, diabetes, high blood pressure and tragically, death from injury and suicide.

In many cases, it is unclear what causes these problems. More research is necessary into prevention and treatment. This bill proposes a study of mental and behavioral health issues in the Arctic. It would create an “Arctic desk” at the National Institute of Health that was called for in federal legislation in 1984 but has never been established. Finally, it would institute a health assessment program at the Centers for Disease Control focused on the Arctic.

This vital research will not only benefit residents of my state but citizens across the country.

The seventh bill in this package addresses the huge losses of coastal Alaskan territory, as a result of dramatic climate change. A June 2009 Government Accountability Study on this issue says - quote: “most of Alaska’s more than 200 Native villages are affected to some degree by flooding and erosion.”

In some cases, entire Arctic villages in my state are at risk of serious erosion or of being washed into the sea. To make matters worse, some of the most severe flooding in recent history occurred this spring. Millions of dollars in damage was done to Alaska communities, prompting state and federal disaster declarations.

To address these issues, I propose creation of an Arctic Adaptation Fund. This fund would help the State of Alaska, Alaska Native organizations, affected Arctic communities, and the private sector deal with the impacts of climate change. This includes flooding, erosion, permafrost melting, and damage to public transportation systems and buildings.

The Fund also would assist in dealing with habitat restoration, clean energy development, and other economic development activities.

Mr. President, I am considering introducing an additional piece of legislation in this package. It focuses on providing the people of Alaska’s Arctic with a greater voice in development decisions affecting their lives.

This bill would establish an Arctic Regional Citizens Advisory Council. It would be modeled after similar councils operating successfully in the Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet regions of Alaska.

At the request of North Slope Borough Mayor Edward Itta and our constituents there, I agreed to hold off on this bill for now so we can continue the conversation with the people of the region, along with industry and regulatory stakeholders.

In addition to the legislation I am introducing today, Senate ratification of two treaties would dramatically improve our nation's ability to address Arctic climate change. The first is the Convention on the Law of the Sea. Negotiated in 1982, this treaty is designed to settle long-standing disputes over national rights to offshore waters and resources.

The Senate's ratification of this treaty would put the United States at the table at a time of great change in the Arctic. I note support for the Law of the Sea Treaty comes from a broad spectrum of organizations, from environmental groups and oil companies to the U.S. military.

I strongly support ratification of the Law of the Sea Treaty and will be proud to cosponsor this measure.

The second key international agreement the Senate should ratify to address Arctic health issues is the Treaty on Persistent Organic Pollutants, or POPs. These pollutants – PCBs, DDT, dioxin, and even fire retardants – are carried by wind and sea currents to the Arctic. They are then trapped by the ice and are stored in the fatty tissues of fish and marine mammals that are a main component of the local subsistence diet.

The POPs treaty was adopted in 2001. But like the Law of the Sea, it has never been ratified. It's time that changed and I am honored to co-sponsor Senator Harkin's S.519 to implement provisions of this treaty.

I look forward to working with the chairman and ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee and the Obama Administration to bring these treaties forward for Senate consideration as soon as possible.

Mr. President, because of Alaska, America is an Arctic nation. My state has over 700 miles of shoreline along the Arctic Ocean and over 100 million acres above the Arctic Circle. If you define Arctic by temperature, it encompasses an even broader area that includes the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands.

Through the diligent work of many scientists, we have learned much over the past century. But there is much we still do not understand. This century, and the next fifty years of Alaska statehood, brings great challenges and even greater opportunities.

To succeed, we must address the broad policy implications of an ice-diminishing Arctic on the diplomatic, scientific and national security fronts. We must make the needed investments to ensure the United States maintains its leadership at the top of our globe. And we must listen to and address the needs of the residents of the Arctic.

With this Inuvikput package of legislation, we will take a major step toward achieving these important goals. As they say in America's Arctic, Quyanaqpak (coy-ah-NUK-puk). Thank you.