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February 11, 2014

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I read with great interest the White House's Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (Plan). I was severely disappointed, however, that the Plan did not offer a vision to make the United States a leader in the Arctic, particularly as we prepare for the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council in May 2015, nor does it suggest that the Arctic is a national priority. Instead, the Plan provides a snap shot of existing Arctic-related programs and projects with numerous assessments to be undertaken, but no real path of action. "Implementation Plan" is a misnomer for a document that simply pushes our involvement in the Arctic down the road and does nothing to advance our already lagging role in the region.

Mr. President, the Arctic is presently not an area subject to long-standing disputes or entrenched views. It is not a hot spot for potential conflict. It is, however, a region that is garnering increased international attention and recognition of its tremendous potential, and generating cooperation among Arctic nations. Our neighbors, Russia to the West and Canada to the East, continue with aggressive national plans combined with state investment to develop northern resources and advance commerce in the North, helping to create jobs and economic growth in areas facing extraordinary challenges. Non-Arctic nations are embracing the opportunities that come with diminished polar sea ice and are reaping the transit benefits and moving ahead with resource exploration and development activities. This activity will continue whether the United States engages or not. It is therefore incumbent upon your Administration to decide whether the United States will take the lead in guiding international policy decisions relating to the Arctic or stand on the sidelines, which is where this Plan will leave us. The United States has never been last in a race to the future, but absent any visionary leadership and meaningful resourcing, we will continue to take a back seat and fail to capitalize on all the Arctic has to offer.


I note the Plan's underlying commitment to take action on climate change. While including climate change challenges in the Plan is worthwhile, it cannot be the only goal. I am concerned there is a heavy emphasis on research and scientific studies that appear to be oriented toward conservation and the pre-emption of development on state, Alaska Native, and federal land, severely limiting economic development and job creation for those who live in the Far North. Similarly, the promotion of Integrated Arctic Management and Ecosystem-Based Management as the primary tools to balance "environmental, economic, and cultural needs and objectives"

raises significant concerns that federal funding prioritized for research will lead to federal policies and regulatory actions that foreclose natural resource development in large areas of the U.S. Arctic, contrary to your pledge for an "all of the above" approach to energy policy.

My state of Alaska stands to be the most impacted by a changing Arctic. While the Plan discusses the importance of coastal and maritime infrastructure, instead of directing Federal agencies to procure ice breakers and develop infrastructure necessary to have a meaningful presence in the Arctic, it calls for a document to "list the capabilities needed to operate in ice-impacted waters" and "develop long-term plans to sustain Federal capability to physically access the Arctic... by the end of 2017." This unambitious timeline for basic inputs, while consistent throughout the Plan, does nothing more than ensure that our nation will be sorely late in addressing our needs in the region. Further, there are existing, on-the-shelf federal studies detailing coastal erosion and inundation threats to critical infrastructure in coastal communities, yet there are no clear, near-term actions called for to address these problems. At a bare minimum the Plan should include an aggressive timeline for the construction and deployment of a deep water port, places of refuge, and improved communications and emergency response capabilities.

Mr. President, in 15 months the United States will become Chair of the Arctic Council and we have a tremendous opportunity to embrace a leadership position in the Arctic. We cannot get there, however, with a Plan that focuses on assessments and studies, maintains a rather meager status quo, and takes resource development off the table. Rather, we need forward-leaning leadership, concrete action and the financial and personnel resources to make the Arctic a national priority. I expect that priority to be demonstrated in your Fiscal Year 2015 budget request.

Sincerely,


Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator