

Arctic Council Working Group – A 2013 Week of the Arctic Summary

Friday morning, concerned Alaskans gathered at the Dena'ina center to listen to some of the state-based Arctic Council representatives speak on the development, proceedings, and the ties that Alaskan Arctic stakeholders have within the Council, its working groups, and its proceedings. With the Arctic Council's recent rise to prominence within the international geopolitical scene and the drastic environmental changes happening within the Arctic, it seems the need for Alaskan understanding and involvement within permanent participant, working group, and ministerial meetings has never been more dire.

Indeed Alaskan interests in the Arctic Council are put in a very unique position. As the United States' only geographic tie to the circumpolar north, Alaska is the sole reason for US membership in the council. Combine this with the often troubled relationship of the state and federal government have when it comes to issues like mineral policy, offshore drilling, and other areas of development, and it is easy to see how Alaska's interests might not be represented effectively. However, as a state, Alaska recognizes that powers associated with foreign policy are directed by and large by the US federal government, and in this case the State Department.

Yet what makes it hard for most Alaskans when Washington defines Arctic policy is the acute unawareness possessed by Americans in regard to the Arctic, Alaska, and many other ties. With just one provincial unit and just 2% of its population located in the geographic Arctic, it is indeed a daunting task for Alaska to influence its policies in an international forum, especially if the state and the Federal government continue to work in a manner that is juxtaposed to one another.

Alaskan representatives to the Arctic Council indeed have these factors in mind when they assist their federal colleagues with the proceedings and developments associated with the Arctic Council. Perhaps no group has quite the tie to Alaskan interests and their representation at the table as the state's indigenous peoples, who are constituencies of four permanent participant groups. If one thinks about how little our population pool and influence is in respect to the federal government, Alaska's indigenous peoples have some of the best ability to represent Alaskan interests via their permanent participant groups. And where the State might have to stand back in favor of federal policy, permanent participants are perhaps one level closer to the interests of the state.

The fact that the Arctic Council is becoming the preeminent form for inter-regional development in the Arctic makes it essential for the citizenries of both Alaska and the United states to understand the basis, functioning, and development behind the Arctic Council and its two agreements. If the citizenry, decision makers, and state actors have a solid understanding of the issues facing the Arctic, the research undertaken by working groups can allow Alaskans to begin developing more of a dialogue. The procedures in which ideas are passed in the Arctic Council will ensure proposals fronted by our federal government largely agree with indigenous peoples and our state.