

COAST GUARD

Observations on Arctic Requirements, Icebreakers, and Coordination with Stakeholders

Highlights of [GAO-12-254T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The gradual retreat of polar sea ice, combined with an expected increase in human activity—shipping traffic, oil and gas exploration, and tourism in the Arctic region—has increased the strategic interest that the United States and other nations have in the Arctic. As a result, the U.S. Coast Guard, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has responsibilities in the Arctic, which are expected to increase. This testimony provides an update of: (1) the extent to which the Coast Guard has taken actions to identify requirements for future Arctic operations; (2) issues related to the U.S. icebreaking fleet; and (3) the extent to which the Coast Guard is coordinating with stakeholders on Arctic issues.

This statement is based on [GAO-10-870](#), issued in September 2010, and includes selected updates. For the selected updates, GAO analyzed Coast Guard, Department of Defense (DOD,) and other related documents on Arctic operations and capabilities. GAO also interviewed Coast Guard and DOD officials about efforts to identify Arctic requirements and coordinate with stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations in this statement. GAO previously recommended that the Coast Guard communicate with key stakeholders on the process and progress of its Arctic planning efforts. DHS concurred with this recommendation and is in the process of taking corrective action.

View [GAO-12-254T](#). For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell, (202) 512-9610, or caldwells@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard has taken a variety of actions—from routine operations to a major analysis of mission needs in the polar regions—to identify its Arctic requirements. The routine operations have helped the Coast Guard to collect useful information on the capability of its existing assets to operate in cold climates and strategies for overcoming logistical challenges presented by long-distance responses to incidents, among other things. Other operational actions intended to help identify Arctic requirements include the establishment of temporary, seasonal operating locations in the Arctic and seasonal biweekly Arctic overflights, which have helped the Coast Guard to identify performance requirements and test personnel and equipment capabilities in the Arctic. The Coast Guard's primary analytical effort to identify Arctic requirements is the High Latitude Study, a multivolume analysis that is intended to, in part, identify the Coast Guard's current Arctic capability gaps and assess the degree to which these gaps will impact future missions. This study also identifies potential solutions to these gaps and compares six different options—identified as Arctic force mixes—to a baseline representing the Coast Guard's current Arctic assets. However, given current budget uncertainty and the Coast Guard's recent acquisition priorities, it may be a significant challenge for the agency to acquire the assets that the High Latitude Study recommends.

The most significant issue facing the Coast Guard's icebreaker fleet is the growing obsolescence of these vessels and the resulting capability gap caused by their increasingly limited operations. In 2010, Coast Guard officials reported challenges fulfilling the agency's statutory icebreaking mission. Since then, at least three reports—by the DHS Inspector General and Coast Guard contractors—have further identified the Coast Guard's challenges to meeting its current and future icebreaking mission requirements in the Arctic with its existing polar icebreaker fleet. Prior GAO work and these reports also identify budgetary challenges the agency faces in acquiring new icebreakers. Given these issues and the current budgetary climate, it is unlikely that the Coast Guard will be able to fund the acquisition of new icebreakers through its own budget, or through alternative financing options. Thus, it is unlikely that the Coast Guard will be able to expand the U.S. icebreaker fleet to meet its statutory requirements, and it may be a significant challenge for it to just maintain its existing level of icebreaking capabilities due to its aging fleet.

In 2010, GAO reported the Coast Guard coordinates with various stakeholders on Arctic operations and policy, including foreign, state, and local governments, Alaskan Native governments and interest groups, and the private sector. GAO also reported that the Coast Guard coordinates with federal agencies, such as the National Science Foundation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and DOD. More recently, the Coast Guard has partnered with DOD through the Capabilities Assessment Working Group—an interagency coordination group established in May 2011—to identify shared Arctic capability gaps as well as opportunities and approaches to overcome them, to include making recommendations for near-term investments. The establishment of this group helps to ensure collaboration between the Coast Guard and DOD addresses near-term capabilities in support of current planning and operations.