

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-460](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Arctic sea ice has diminished, lengthening the navigation season and increasing opportunities for maritime shipping. However, the U.S. Arctic lacks maritime infrastructure—such as a deep-draft port and comprehensive nautical charting—to support increased traffic. The lack of infrastructure exacerbates risks inherent to shipping in the Arctic such as vast distances and dangerous weather.

This report examines (1) how U.S. Arctic shipping trends have changed since 2009 and factors that have shaped shipping in the region, and (2) the extent to which U.S. agencies' efforts to address Arctic maritime infrastructure gaps have aligned with leading management practices. GAO collected U.S. Coast Guard traffic data from 2009 through 2019 and interviewed 20 stakeholders selected to represent a range of views. GAO also analyzed Arctic strategies, interviewed selected agencies involved with maritime infrastructure, and compared efforts to leading management practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that OSTP and other appropriate entities within the Executive Office of the President: develop and publish a strategy to address gaps and designate the interagency mechanism responsible for leading federal efforts. OSTP neither agreed nor disagreed but noted it is considering the need for and role of additional federal coordination. GAO stands by its recommendations.

View [GAO-20-460](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov

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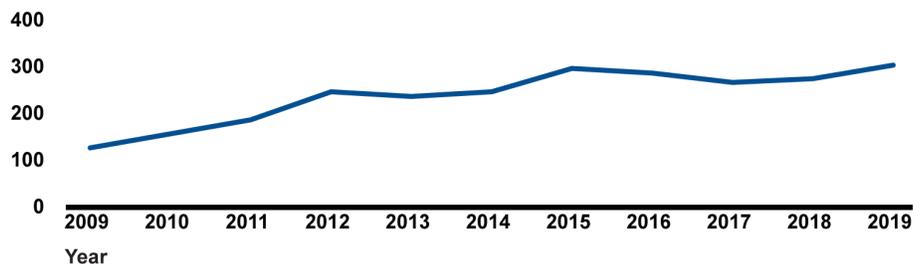
MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURE

A Strategic Approach and Interagency Leadership Could Improve Federal Efforts in the U.S. Arctic

What GAO Found

Maritime shipping activity, as indicated by the number of vessels in the U.S. Arctic, generally increased from 2009 through 2019. Domestic maritime activity declined after the discontinuation of offshore oil and gas exploration activities in Alaska's Chukchi Sea in 2015. However, since 2015, international activities related to natural gas development, particularly in the Russian Arctic, have increased, according to stakeholders. Factors affecting decisions of ship operators about whether to operate in the U.S. Arctic include increased operating costs of Arctic-capable ships, environmental changes that have caused more volatile weather and ice conditions, and concerns over environmental impacts.

Number of Vessels in the U.S. Coast Guard Arctic Area of Interest, 2009-2019



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-20-460

Note: The USCG District 17 Arctic area of interest is defined as north of the Bering Strait to the North Pole, east to Banks Island in the Canadian Arctic, and west into Russia to the New Siberian Islands.

Agencies have taken some steps to address Arctic maritime infrastructure gaps identified by federal agencies, such as a lack of nautical charting, but federal efforts lack a current strategy and interagency leadership. Examples of agency actions include the U.S. Coast Guard developing recommended shipping routes and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration continuing to chart Arctic waters. To guide federal efforts, the White House developed a *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* in 2013 and established an interagency Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) in 2015. However, agency officials and stakeholders noted the strategy is now outdated due to changing conditions in the Arctic. As a result, federal efforts lack a current government-wide strategy that aligns with key management practices such as identifying goals, objectives, and establishing performance measures. Moreover, U.S. Arctic interagency groups do not reflect leading collaboration practices, such as sustained leadership and inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, and the White House has not designated which entity is to lead U.S. Arctic maritime infrastructure efforts. For example, the AESC is now dormant according to agency officials and staff at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), which chairs the AESC. Without a current strategy and a designated interagency entity with these collaboration practices in place, agencies may miss opportunities to leverage resources and target infrastructure improvements in areas that would best mitigate risks.