

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-738T](#), 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 retreat of polar sea ice in the Arctic, as reported by the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center, combined with an expected increase in human activity there, has heightened U.S. and other nations' interests in the Arctic region in recent years. Growth in Arctic activity is expected to increase demand for services such as search and rescue and maritime navigation support, which can be a challenge to provide given the harsh and unpredictable weather and vast distances that responding agencies must travel to reach the Arctic. The Coast Guard plays a significant role in U.S. Arctic policy and issued its Arctic strategy in May 2013.

This statement addresses the extent to which the Coast Guard has (1) assessed its Arctic capabilities and taken actions to mitigate any identified gaps, and (2) reported being able to carry out polar icebreaking operations. This testimony is based on a June 2016 GAO report. GAO reviewed relevant laws and policies and Coast Guard documents that detail Arctic plans, among other things. Detailed information on GAO's scope and methodology can be found in the June 2016 report.

View [GAO-16-738T](#). For more information, contact Jennifer A. Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

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COAST GUARD

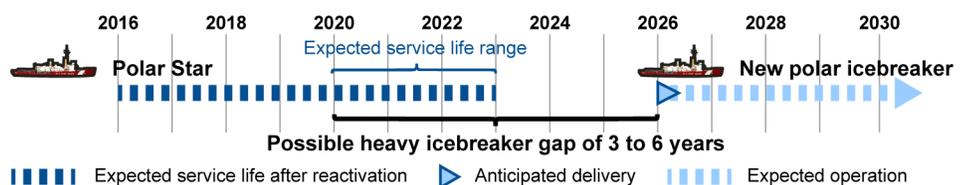
Agency Could Better Assess Its Impact on Arctic Capability Gaps and Is Exploring Icebreaker Acquisition Options

What GAO Found

GAO reported in June 2016 that the U.S. Coast Guard, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), had assessed its Arctic capabilities and worked with its Arctic partners—such as other federal agencies—to mitigate Arctic capability gaps, including communications and training. Although Coast Guard officials stated that the agency's actions, such as testing communication equipment in the Arctic and conducting Arctic oil spill response exercises, have helped to mitigate Arctic capability gaps, the Coast Guard has not systematically assessed the impact of its actions on these gaps. GAO recommended in June 2016 that the Coast Guard develop measures, as appropriate, and design and implement a process, for systematically assessing the extent to which its actions have helped mitigate Arctic capability gaps. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendations, and the Coast Guard reported that it planned to develop specific measures for some of its Arctic activities and systematically assess how its actions have helped to mitigate the capability gaps for which the Coast Guard is the lead agency. While officials stated they are unable to unilaterally close capability gaps for which the Coast Guard is not the lead agency, assessing the impact of Coast Guard actions for such capability gaps would better enable the Coast Guard to understand the effectiveness of its actions and the status of all capability gaps, as well as plan its Arctic operations.

GAO's June 2016 report also found that the Coast Guard has been unable to fulfill its polar icebreaking responsibilities with its aging icebreaker fleet, which currently includes two active icebreakers. In 2011 and 2012, the Coast Guard was unable to maintain year-round access to the Arctic and did not meet 4 of 11 requests for polar icebreaking services. With its one active heavy icebreaker—which has greater icebreaking capability—nearing the end of its service life, the Coast Guard initiated a program in 2013 to acquire a new one and is working to determine the optimal acquisition strategy. However, the Coast Guard's efforts to acquire an icebreaker, whether by lease or purchase, will be limited by legal and operational requirements. In addition, current projections show that the Coast Guard is likely to have a 3- to 6-year gap in its heavy icebreaking capability before a new icebreaker becomes operational, as shown below. The Coast Guard is developing a strategy to determine how to address this expected gap.

Coast Guard's Heavy Icebreaker Availability and Expected Capability Gap, Present until 2030



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard documents. | [GAO-16-738T](#)