

Trump's Arctic push to get boost with new Alaska DOE office



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A landscape is seen on Sept. 17, 2019 near Denali, Alaska. | Joe Raedle/Getty Images

The Energy Department is close to officially reopening an Arctic Energy Office in Alaska that will expand the agency's research into the region's changing climate and how to adapt oil and gas production to it.

The effort to reopen the office has been helped by Alaska Sen. [Lisa Murkowski](#) (R) and comes as the Trump administration seeks to increase U.S. influence in the Arctic, a region Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last year had become "an arena for power and for competition" among the eight countries that occupy it.

The new DOE office will be located on the University of Alaska's Fairbanks campus and is expected to be a "high profile partnership," said Gwen Holdmann, director at the Alaska Center for Energy and Power research program and who has worked closely with DOE on the project.

[Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette told Murkowski at a May budget hearing](#) he expected the decision on expanding DOE's Alaska operations by three to five people to be made in about 90 days.

Holdmann said the office's three priorities — energy, environment and security — have been developed in conversations with the university, the Energy Department, as well as four national labs over the past two years dating back to the May 2018 [National Lab Day conference](#) that was hosted by Murkowski.

The Senate Energy chair secured language in the [2020 Energy and Water Development Appropriations bill](#) that said the office is intended to promote research on electric power technology and the development of crude oil extraction, "re injection of carbon, and extended drilling technologies."

The Arctic Energy Office was created under the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2001 and was originally housed in Washington, though it was later moved to the National Energy Technology Laboratory, which has offices across the country, including Anchorage. The AEO has been without a director or funding for the past eight years or so, Holdmann said.

The office will look at climate "writ large," according to Holdmann, including climate forecasts and assessments of communities that are expected to be displaced because of melting sea ice.

Alaska has warmed at double the rate of the rest of the U.S., with average annual temperatures up by 3 degree Fahrenheit since the middle of the 20th century. Holdmann said the length of the frost-free season in Fairbanks has increased by 50 percent over the past 100 years.

Nikos Tsafos, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, points out that while the U.S. does not rely on Arctic oil supplies, Alaska's economy is still dependent on the energy industry.

Plus, if the U.S. wants to build infrastructure like pipelines and roads, "you need to understand how the environment is changing ... especially for Republican administrations, but definitely [for Alaskans in both parties], developing these resources has been a huge priority and it's always been a challenge."

The security aspect of the office will focus on food security and wellness, since melting sea ice will allow increased shipping and military activity and could lead to greater risks, whether related to the environment or public health.

The advent of ice-free summers has opened up new fisheries for commercial fishing in the Arctic, which could also cause potential environmental conflicts without clearly defined borders.

Abbie Tingstad, a senior physical scientist and associate director of the engineering and applied sciences department at the RAND Corporation, said putting an office in Alaska is an acknowledgment of the U.S.' strategic interest in the Arctic region, particularly as competition with Russia and China heats up.

Russia has harnessed the “dual use” — energy and defense — in its Arctic territories, Tsafos of CSIS said, but it’s harder for the U.S. to justify a larger military presence without vibrant economic activity or movement. This office could help change that and catch up to Russia in trying to match “an energy business with more strategic military goals,” he added.

A senior Energy Department official told POLITICO the “office will soon be stood up, which is consistent with both the secretary and deputy secretary testimonies, where they made that commitment to get that done by the end of the fiscal year.”

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