

CLIMATE: Melting sea ice brings flood of security concerns— experts

By Robin Bravender
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As House Democrats race toward a comprehensive bill to address climate change, experts warned lawmakers with jurisdiction over foreign affairs yesterday that global warming is likely to pose national security threats as Arctic ice melts away.

"There is no place in the world where global warming is having a more profound effect than the Arctic," said Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, at a hearing yesterday. "These changes have had serious impacts on the environment; they also have significant implications for U.S. foreign policy and for national security, as well as the economy," he said.

Recent studies have shown that Arctic sea ice has receded rapidly in recent years, leading to concerns about conflicts over environmental protection, control of recently opened waterways and access to natural resources as nations scramble to exploit the resource-rich region.

The Arctic is on pace to be ice-free in the summer by 2013, said Scott Borgerson, a visiting fellow for ocean governance at the Council on Foreign Relations. "That's soon, and our country is not prepared," he said.

Borgerson warned lawmakers that the region holds a tremendous amount of oil and gas resources and lines on state sovereignty in the region are blurred, so "there are all the ingredients for trouble."

"Those have been sleeping dogs up until now," he added, "but with dramatic climate change happening there, sleeping dogs might not lie."

According to a report released last summer by the U.S. Geological Survey, the region north of the Arctic Circle accounts for 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of its undiscovered natural gas.

Nations bordering the Arctic are already making claims on the oil-, gas- and mineral-rich territory, but several disputes have already arisen over competing claims and witnesses warned lawmakers that more disputes would likely arise if stronger international policies are not developed.

Just before leaving office, the Bush administration called on federal agencies to begin preparing a U.S. claim. The revised U.S. Arctic Policy directed federal agencies to "take all actions necessary" to determine potential U.S. claims to the Arctic seabed (ClimateWire, Jan. 13).

But for the United States, making a claim in the Arctic will be difficult unless the Senate ratifies the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, according to the policy. The 25-year-old agreement establishes a 200-mile exclusive economic zone that countries can manage at their discretion. It also allows any member country to apply to extract natural resources outside the 200-mile limit if the country can show that its continental slope extends beyond that point.

Until the United States formally signs on to the treaty, which stalled last year shy of a Senate floor vote, it cannot file a formal claim to extend its rights off the coast of Alaska and other areas, nor can it formally dispute claims by other nations, such as Russia and Canada.

"The United States is far past overdue to join and accede to the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea," Borgerson said. The treaty has been signed and ratified by 156 countries and although the United States abides by the treaty in practice, "We remain amongst a rather illustrious group of Libya, North Korea and Iran who have yet to formally join this treaty."

Mead Treadwell, chairman of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, also stressed the need for policies that promote research collaboration on the effects of global warming on the Arctic. The United States is now pressing Russia for greater, more predictable access to Arctic waters for research, he said.

"We cannot give you the data that we need to give you without stronger international cooperation in the Arctic," Treadwell told the committee.

The committee's ranking member, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), called for "more work to be done to better understand what has been termed as 'global climate change,'" and its implications on potential challenges and opportunities in the Arctic.

"Our overall knowledge of the problem and its many components are still very limited," Ros-Lehtinen said. "Extrapolating trends based on limited data is always risky business. It is risky to act without adequate information and mistaking possibilities for inevitabilities."