

White House outlines new policy for protecting, drilling in Arctic

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WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration on Friday released a national strategy for the Arctic in advance of Secretary of State John Kerry's trip next week to Sweden to attend a conference of eight polar nations.

In the policy, the White House outlines its approach to some key Arctic issues, even as it acknowledges that there are conflicting -- and even contradictory -- goals and challenges as rapidly melting sea ice makes the region more accessible. The Arctic is warming twice as fast as other regions of the Earth.

"Our pioneering spirit is naturally drawn to this region for the economic opportunities it presents and in recognition of the need to protect and conserve this unique, valuable and changing environment," Obama said in the opening page of the strategy, released in advance of Wednesday's Arctic Council meeting.

Some of the potential economic opportunities include the possibility of additional oil and gas exploration, new fishing territory and increased transit through previously inaccessible oceans, and even tourism. But they come as the United States has to grapple with the question of how much the oil and gas extraction will contribute to the very conditions that are opening the Arctic to more exploration. The president's Arctic strategy came out even as scientists recorded the highest-ever daily mean concentrations of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere.

The White House said the U.S. approach to Arctic matters includes responding to emerging opportunities while simultaneously protecting and conserving a unique environment. Its strategy also recognizes that an undisciplined approach to exploring new opportunities could harm the region as well as threaten national security interests and the global good.

Environmental organizations that monitor the Arctic say Obama's policy lacks muscle. They're worried in particular about whether the Arctic Council will be more aggressive in its policies on short-term pollutants, including diesel emissions, that help accelerate sea ice melt in the Arctic.

"Climate change is wreaking havoc on the Arctic, melting sea ice and permafrost, increasing storms and erosion, and making life utterly unpredictable for the people and animals that call the Arctic home," Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, said in an email. "Rather than making vague statements about Arctic stewardship, the Obama administration should put forward real solutions, such as a cap on black carbon emissions and a moratorium on Arctic offshore oil development."

In Sweden, Kerry, along with representatives from other polar nations, will sign an agreement to cooperate on marine oil pollution preparedness and response. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, will be joining him at the Arctic Council meeting. The Arctic's importance to the United States as a nation demands greater attention, Murkowski said in a statement.

The State Department said the agreement is designed so that as the potential for oil exploration grows in the region, Arctic countries are able to quickly and cooperatively respond to spills before they endanger lives and threaten fragile ecosystems. Already, that capacity has been tested. The U.S. Coast Guard has asked the Justice Department to investigate possible pollution violations by both of the drilling rigs Shell used in its botched efforts to explore for oil last year in Arctic Ocean waters off the northern coast of Alaska.

"In the Arctic, that all-of-the-above policy is so wrong for so many reasons," Erika Rosenthal of Earthjustice, an environmental legal organization, said

in an interview. Rosenthal has worked on developing a policy on short-term emissions for the Arctic Council. “There’s no demonstrated spill response policy, and the Arctic is an enormously sensitive environment.”

The administration was careful to note it would work closely with the state of Alaska as well as tribes in the region. That includes pairing traditional knowledge with current scientific research, as well as careful consideration of the role of tribal governments in the Arctic. The White House announced plans Friday to hold roundtable discussions in Alaska in June to discuss how to actually put in place the concepts laid out in the national strategy.

In April, a federal working group recommended that the Obama administration adopt a science-based approach to managing the region. Now, said Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, the challenge is to commit to paying for icebreakers, Arctic ports and the research that’s vital to sustainable management of the region.

“I’m pleased this administration responded to our request to recognize the enormous opportunities and challenges in a changing Arctic,” Begich said in a statement. “Until now, the U.S. was the only Arctic nation lacking a formal strategy and effort to coordinate federal agencies in their approach to the Arctic.”