CONFERENCE EMPHASIZES COOPERATION, NOTES GAPS IN ARCTIC MANAGEMENT

Bob Tkacz

SEWARD, Alaska. Government and unofficial representatives of the five countries with Arctic Ocean shorelines at a three-day conference here said existing international laws and treaties provide a sufficient framework to address fisheries, other commercial activity, and larger political and environmental questions in the polar sea.

Rejecting the proposition from non-Arctic countries that a new international pact, possibly based on the neutral territory model of the Antarctic should be considered, Arctic diplomats including a US ambassador acknowledged that regional fisheries management organization for the world's northernmost international waters could be necessary.

"We believe that the time has come to prepare for future fisheries in the Arctic on stocks that are shared by two or more nations," said David Balton, US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Fisheries at the "Changes in the Arctic Environment and Law of the Sea" conference here May 20-23. "It is possible to foresee, for example, the advent of commercial fisheries in the Russian, US and Canadian Exclusive Economic Zones on transboundary stocks in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. We need to be thinking now about

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mechanisms for managing such transboundary fisheries in the future," Balton added.

Balton was one of seven ambassadors, among more than a dozen credentialed diplomats from twelve countries at the conference who also acknowledged continuing disagreements over freedom of access for and control of increasing ship traffic. The event was the 33rd annual conference of the Center for Oceans Law and Policy, a University of Virginia Law School think tank. More than 100 participants from twelve countries ranging from China to Monaco heard panel discussions on maritime boundary, transportation, marine safety and impacts on humans and the environment.

The views of internationally recognized researchers contrasted with the consensus of cooperation from government officials. US and Canadian academicians warned that laws are only as good as the political will to respect or enforce them and said the speed of ice melt and other physical changes could easily overcome current preparations.

"All of the models that you saw of global warming are linear. They are predicting small amounts of increase in temperature and the effects. None bring into consideration abrupt climate change," Dr. Stephen Macko, a University of Virginia geochemist, said during a discussion on environmental issues. Methane released into the atmosphere as peat in the Arctic permafrost melts could have ten times the effect of carbon dioxide on earth temperature but the prospect is not being closely studied, Macko said. "If there is catastrophic loss of gas hydrate or methane from the Arctic we could see catastrophic change in earth's temperatures," he added.

Macko said he viewed the threat to crab, lobster and clam populations from ocean acidification as a more serious threat than climate change, which is also bringing impacts beyond current expectations. "Conservative" projections for long-term sea level rise in the range of "a few meters" are being replaced by estimates of more than eleven meters in the next century, Macko added.

"We're dealing with a rate of change to a region that is confounding everybody to such a degree that we are going to get it wrong," said Dr. Rob Huebert, Associate Director of the Center for Marine and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary.

American and Danish diplomats chided Huebert after he observed that the combination of vast economic gain and increasing military power has commonly resulted in problems. "As a political scientist I looked historically in the past for