

Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting

Fairbanks 11 May 2017

Statement by Iceland

Distinguished Ministers, Permanent Participants, other members of the Arctic Council and observers. It is a privilege to visit Fairbanks and experience Alaska first-hand as we conclude the US Chairmanship.

Mr. Chair,

As we look back on the progress and our accomplishments, we can proudly rejoice over our achievements here today. The US Chairmanship Program has been both ambitious and pragmatic. Under the theme “One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges and Responsibilities” the focus has been on work to protect the marine environment, conserve Arctic biodiversity, improve conditions in Arctic communities, and address the rapidly changing climate in the Arctic.

It goes without saying that all these issues are crucial for the people of the Arctic and the Circumpolar region as a whole. In this important work, the Chairmanship has been able to draw on the expertise of the Council’s capable working groups, coupled with the staunch support of the Secretariat.

The Paris Agreement was a landmark achievement that Iceland is proud to be a party to. For the first time, we have a legally-binding agreement that commits all parties to take action and address climate change. Iceland was among the countries pushing for an ambitious agreement. We are also determined to maintain that ambition when it comes to implementation. So much is at stake, especially for the Arctic states, given the negative effects of increased greenhouse gas emissions and its consequences for the region and its environment.

In Iceland, the Arctic has become a key foreign policy priority and it matters a lot for the Icelandic people, who in its entirety live in the Arctic region. Our interests in the Arctic are manifold. They relate to protection of the region’s vulnerable environment, sustainable economic development and utilization of natural resources. Further, we place strong emphasis on security and safety, infrastructure and, of course, cooperation with all involved stakeholders, including the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, as well as the observers. At this Ministerial we especially welcome seven new observers, with whom we look forward to cooperating.

Iceland has participated actively in the work of the Arctic Council during the US chairmanship. For instance, we co-led the Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation along with the US and Norway. It has been increasingly evident in recent years that climate change is impacting the marine ecosystem, and for a country like Iceland, which bases its livelihood to a substantial extent on the resources of the ocean, this development is of great concern.

Our accomplishments, documented in the Fairbanks Declaration are only the top of the iceberg with respect to the extensive work done by the Council's subsidiary bodies. I would like to thank all those participating in this important work for their commitment and contribution. I also want to express our appreciation to the Secretariat for their valuable support and professional work.

The eight Arctic states all share a common responsibility and a mutual interest in the protection and sustainability of the Arctic. In our effort to live up to this responsibility, our work has included environmental protection, sustainable economic development and utilization of natural resources, security and safety, infrastructure and connectivity. It is safe to say that the theme of the Finnish Chairmanship, – “Exploring Common Solutions” – captures well these diverse issues.

Iceland is fully committed to continue its active and constructive participation in our joint work during the Finnish Chairmanship. In two years' time Iceland will follow in Finland's footsteps and take over the chairmanship. Our preparations have already begun and we look forward to shouldering this responsibility, which we take very seriously.

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to commend the United States government at the conclusion of their chairmanship. The engagement and effort the United States has put into their Chairmanship program has been instrumental in focusing international attention on the Arctic, and in particular on the Arctic Council and its important work.

Let me conclude by thanking Secretary Tillerson and his team for all the demanding work during the last two years and wishing the incoming chair, Minister Soini and his team, all the best during Finland's Chairmanship.

Thank you.