

Joint Statement on Climate Change and the Arctic

The rapid warming of the Arctic is profoundly affecting communities both in the Arctic region and beyond. As Ministers and other representatives from the Arctic States attending the GLACIER¹ conference in Anchorage, Alaska on August 31, 2015, and recognizing the leadership role of the Arctic States in providing sustainable development and cooperation in the Arctic, we reaffirm our commitment to take urgent action to slow the pace of warming in the Arctic, focusing on actions that impact the global atmosphere as well as the Arctic itself. The Ministers and other representatives from Germany, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom, and European Union join us in this commitment.

We take seriously warnings by scientists: temperatures in the Arctic are increasing at more than twice the average global rate. Loss of Arctic snow and ice is accelerating the warming of the planet as a whole by exposing darker surfaces that absorb more sunlight and heat. Sea ice, the Greenland Ice Sheet, and nearly all glaciers in the Arctic have shrunk over the past 100 years; indeed, glaciers that have endured since the last Ice Age are shrinking, in most cases at a very rapid rate. Arctic sea ice decline has been faster during the past ten years than in the previous 20 years, with summer sea ice extent reduced by 40% since 1979. Loss of ice from Arctic glaciers and ice sheets contributes to rising sea levels worldwide, which put coastal communities everywhere at increased risk of coastal erosion and persistent flooding. And emerging science suggests that rapid warming of the Arctic may disrupt weather patterns across the globe.

Moreover, as the Arctic continues to warm, significant feedback loops appear to be coming into play. Warmer, drier weather increases the occurrence, extent, and severity of wildfires that release carbon from vast tracts of burning forests, with about five million acres burned this year in Alaska alone. Warming also promotes thawing of permafrost, which could release substantial stores of greenhouse gas emissions. And the relentless loss of Arctic snow and ice exposes yet more land and water, which in turn absorb yet more heat.

Arctic communities are experiencing first-hand the challenges of dealing with a rapidly changing climate. Thawing permafrost is triggering the collapse of roads, bridges and other infrastructure, and coastal erosion is requiring entire communities to consider relocation. Warming-induced changes can also reduce wildlife and fish populations that support subsistence hunting and fishing. These impacts highlight the need for adaptive management and infrastructure, and illustrate the emerging threat to traditional ways of life.

¹ GLACIER stands for Global Leadership in the Arctic: Cooperation, Innovation, Engagement, and Resilience.

As change continues at an unprecedented rate in the Arctic – increasing the stresses on communities and ecosystems in already harsh environments – we are committed more than ever to protecting both terrestrial and marine areas in this unique region, and our shared planet, for generations to come.

In particular, we affirm our strong determination to work together and with others to achieve a successful, ambitious outcome at the international climate negotiations in December in Paris this year.²

In addition, we acknowledge the importance of the Framework for Action on Black Carbon and Methane, adopted at the Arctic Council Ministerial in April 2015, which provides for enhanced opportunities to act together to reduce emissions of black carbon (soot) that impact the Arctic. Actions to reduce methane – a powerful short-lived greenhouse gas – can slow Arctic warming in the near to medium term. To address the largest industrial source of methane globally, we encourage all oil and gas firms headquartered or operating within our borders to join the Climate and Clean Air Coalition's Oil and Gas Methane Partnership.

We call for additional research to characterize the response of Arctic permafrost and other carbon reservoirs to warming, and resolve to cooperate on wildland fire management, especially in hotspots that have the potential to release particularly large stores of greenhouse gases. We further urge the scientific community, in cooperation with northern communities, to continue to provide the information and tools necessary to assist the Arctic's most vulnerable communities build resilience to climate impacts and to prioritize further research on, and communication of, the links between a changing Arctic and impacts felt across the globe, including on how such changes may affect mid-latitude weather patterns. We also resolve to work with our Arctic communities to deploy low-carbon solutions that can improve livelihoods, enhance energy security, and promote sustainable economic growth such as renewable energy technologies and energy efficiency measures.

Climate change poses a grave challenge in the Arctic and to the world. But these challenges also present an imperative for cooperation, innovation, and engagement as we work together to safeguard this vital region and to inform the world why the Arctic matters to us all.

² 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21).