Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

When Alaska was acquired by the United States in 1867, few could have foreseen the vast natural riches which lay beneath her lands and within her waters. The bounty from oil, gas, minerals, timber, fur, and fish has promoted a vibrant economy for the state and its inhabitants. It has also provided essential natural resources for the Nation as a whole, and enriched the treasuries of both state and federal governments.

We now stand at the dawn of a new era with equal potential. The opening of the Arctic offers untold opportunity in shipping, resource development, scientific research, and environmental protection. The United States can ill afford to stand by while other Arctic nations assert themselves. Our national security and economic interests dictate that we maintain a robust presence throughout the Arctic region. Central to these responsibilities is a functional fleet of icebreakers.

Congress commissioned numerous studies from public and private sources, such as the Coast Guard and the National Academy of Sciences, which clearly indicate a need for three heavy and three medium icebreakers, at a minimum. We were encouraged by your remarks at the Coast Guard Academy commencement, which demonstrated your understanding of this need. We believe your upcoming trip to the Arctic will reinforce this conclusion.

Thus far, all federal efforts have started as a federal shipbuilding program, and looked at only developing requirements for federally-owned, federally-built, federally-crewed icebreakers. However, the goal is not to build an icebreaker for the sole purpose of owning an icebreaker. We encourage you to return to fundamentals, by looking first at the federal missions to be carried out in the Arctic requiring a ship-based presence, and then looking at the options available for carrying out those missions. In addition to federal ownership and operation, such options include contracts for services, vessel leases or charters, and hybrid public-private crewing of public or privately owned vessels. In addition, we encourage you to look at funding from the multiple agencies requiring a ship based presence in the Arctic. The goal should not be to build the best

federally-owned ship possible, but to meet the federal mission requirements in the most flexible, cost-effective manner for the taxpayers.

The use of some of the non-exclusively federal options above may soften the short-term fiscal impact to the federal budget, improve the long-term impact on the taxpayer, and allow for quicker availability of modern assets to carry out the growing federal presence in the Arctic. It would be a mistake to ignore the considerable contributions that can be made by the private sector, if it makes economic and operational sense to do so. Coast Guard estimates suggest a ten year, billion dollar-plus construction program for each icebreaker needed. We have not as yet figured out how to gain the time or acquire the money to follow this path. It is important to examine whether the use of the private sector to construct comparable vessels, or to provide services in other ways, may lead to significant savings in time and costs. Privately constructed and operated vessels could then be leased by the Coast Guard, as is being successfully done with the National Science Foundation, Military Sealift Command, and the Special Operations Command.

In addition to construction and time savings, the charter or services-based options may also offer a reduction in operational and legacy costs. As we know from the POLAR STAR and POLAR SEA, legacy costs are not inconsiderable. In much the same way that the deployment of U.S. military personnel abroad is now supported by contractor services for non-military functions, there is no need for U.S. Coast Guard personnel to perform routine services such as cooking, cleaning, and maintenance of the vessel. These services can be provided by the private sector with no compromise to mission function.

Considering that this is truly a broad national and economic security imperative, funding sources should be broadened to include the Departments of Defense, Commerce, and Transportation. Broadening who can contribute to this needed icebreaking expansion will more accurately reflect the stakeholders involved and soften the financial impact to each agency's annual budget.

Mr. President, for more than a decade, those who have operational interests in the Arctic have discussed the need for an aggressive program for icebreaker construction. Yet those discussions have evolved little and yielded nothing. It is time to change our collective thinking. We urge you to look at the broadest range of options for the design and implementation of a multi-agency program for acquiring the federal icebreaking services needed to carry out federal safety, security, and environmental stewardship missions in the Arctic – including the chartering of a fleet of privately-constructed, privately-operated icebreakers that can be paid for by several pertinent agencies. Your upcoming trip to the Arctic offers the opportunity to announce just this sort of bold and desperately needed initiative.

We stand ready to work with you on this subject, and we wish you a safe and successful visit to the Arctic.

Sincerely,

Bill Shuster
Chairman
Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure

Duncan Hunter
Chairman
Subcommittee on Coast Guard
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Don Young
Congressman for All Alaska

cc: Secretary Jeh Johnson