

## Melting ice could mean new riches

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"It's not a question of if but when."

That's what Mead Treadwell, chairman of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, told a New York City crowd Monday about the prospect of a booming northwest passage.

Treadwell made the remarks during a moderated panel discussion, "Will the Bering Strait become the Panama Canal of the North?" hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations at Alaska House New York. (Alaska House is a nonprofit organization founded by Alaska Dispatch publisher Alice Rogoff to promote education about Alaska and its Native culture and foster economic development within the state.)

The day's discussion, which pulled together Alaska's congressional delegates, regional leaders and industry representatives, centered on the sense of urgency seemingly missing both in the state and nationwide for developing the infrastructure -- like deep water ports and international rules -- that will be needed to tap into a new hustling, bustling Bering Strait.

Two of the world's largest mining operations are above the Arctic Circle, including the Red Dog zinc mine in Alaska off the coast of Kivalina, according to Treadwell -- and the Arctic is poised to deliver even more resources. Minerals, fishing, oil and gas, exploration and science, and tourism all have northern footholds. Capturing opportunities related to those activities with the prospect of shorter shipping routes as ice recedes is something Americans need to be thinking about now, Treadwell said.

The challenge is building the infrastructure. Deep water ports are needed to accommodate large container ships and provide an anchor for the military presence that will need to increase to keep pace with a rise in offshore activity near the United States' northern coast.

Participants, including Rogoff, suggested that developing port infrastructure for Alaska's western coast, from Adak to Barrow, could be an economic boom as important to the state as the trans-Alaska oil pipeline, particularly when even a handful of new port jobs has the potential to pull villages teetering on the brink of economic failure into sustainability.

Alaska Sens. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican, and Mark Begich, a Democrat, attended the event and told participants they are aware of the critical role Alaska is poised to play in a changing Arctic environment. Murkowski is pushing for a Department of Defense and Homeland Security feasibility study for a deep water port off Alaska's shores.

"This study will determine whether it is in the strategic interest of the United States, as I believe it is, to build a port and where it might be located. A deep water port would not only serve our military and Coast Guard needs, but as we develop our offshore oil and gas reserves and see more shipping, tourism and vessel traffic in the Arctic, a deep water port could provide valuable support," Murkowski said.

A full transcript of the day's discussion will be posted online at the Council on Foreign Relations' Web site.

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