

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE LABOR AND COMMERCE STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 31, 2019
1:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Lora Reinbold, Chair
Senator Mia Costello, Vice Chair
Senator Chris Birch
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Click Bishop

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION IN ALASKA - PACIFIC
NORTHWEST ECONOMIC REGION

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

NIRAV DESAI, Senior Partner
Moonbeam; Co-Chair, Innovation Working Group
Pacific Northwest Economic Region
Seattle, Washington

POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in a presentation on
opportunities for innovation in Alaska.

STEVE MYERS, Senior Program Manager
Pacific Northwest Economic Region
Seattle, Washington

POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in a presentation on
opportunities for innovation in Alaska.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:31:00 PM](#)

CHAIR LORA REINBOLD called the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Costello, Gray-Jackson, Birch and Chair Reinbold.

PRESENTATION: Opportunities for Innovation in Alaska, Pacific Northwest Economic Region

[1:32:04 PM](#)

CHAIR REINBOLD announced that the only order of business would be a presentation: Opportunities for Innovation in Alaska, by the Pacific Northwest Economic Region.

She remarked that Alaska has an abundance of water and she hoped that connections could be made between Alaska and the Lower 48, which has suffered from a lack of water.

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STEVE MYERS, Senior Program Manager, Pacific Northwest Economic Region (PNWER), provided a background on PNWER, which is a statutory public and private nonprofit organization created in 1991 by western states and Canadian territories. He related PNWER participants include Alaska, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Montana and the Canadian territories and provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, and the Yukon. In addition, PNWER is comprised of over 20 different working groups and initiatives that examine segments of the economy to identify best practices for collaborative work on challenges across the region. The PNWER works with federal partners in Washington, D.C. and Ottawa to promote the voices of the region, he said. The Innovation Working Group has worked to identify ways to leverage resources and assets in the region and to better work collaboratively. Mr. Desai will give an overview of what may help the future of the region.

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NIRAV DESAI, Senior Partner, Moonbeam, Co-Chair, Innovation Working Group, Pacific Northwest Economic Region (PNWER began his PowerPoint presentation, "Building Connections between Alaska and Innovation Economies in the Lower Forty-Eight." His goal is help connect the innovation economy, particularly in the Lower 48, so states can benefit from the environmental and cultural aspects of Alaska, he said.

He reviewed his background. He formerly worked for a global consulting firm, leading the innovation hub strategy. He has worked on four innovation economies, in San Francisco, Seattle,

Boston, and Austin, seeking ways to make connections between start-up activities in these cities and large enterprise customers. In the past five years his focus has been on mapping innovation locations throughout the country.

MR. DESAI began his own business in Seattle, [Moonbeam] and he has networked throughout the start-up ecosystem in the Pacific Northwest, including mentoring TechStars Seattle, a startup accelerator, and the University of Washington's CoMotion Labs. He offered his belief that this type of technology could have implications for remote parts of Alaska. More recently, he has focused on establishing an innovation brokerage to connect innovation supply and demand entities with unique capabilities and enterprises to transform incumbent businesses.

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MR. DESAI moved to slide 2, "Alaska from a Startup's Perspective." Prior to coming to Alaska, he spoke to a number of startup CEOs in Seattle to get their perspective on Alaska. He summarized the "pros" for startups in Alaska. Primarily, Alaska presents opportunities, has a prevalence of domain expertise, and risk is taken and tolerated. He said that Alaska's engineering talent and knowledge is recognized in the Lower 48. A significant number of large corporations operate in Alaska in energy, mining, land management, fishing, health, and agriculture. It is important to note that risk is taken and tolerated in Alaska, since risk-averse enterprises often do not innovate.

He turned to the cons or challenges from a startup's perspective of operating in Alaska. It relates primarily to investment and access to capital, he said. Alaska ranks at the bottom, 49th in the nation, for access to early stage funding. Given its distance from the rest of the country, Alaska also faces engineering challenges. In order for startups to integrate economies, it means they must find ways to overcome some of these challenges, he said.

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CHAIR REINBOLD asked for the source of the study.

MR. DESAI offered his belief that Forbes magazine did the study to review accessibility of capital in states. Last year Alaska funded three venture capital startups for a total value of \$3.7 million. Although some angel investment networks are being built and some venture capital funds occur in Alaska, it is pretty

nascent. This may have had some bearing on the state's ranking, he said.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked how the lack of sales or business taxes affect startups.

MR. DESAI said business taxes do not matter as much early for startups since they do not expect to make a profit in their first three to five years. However, it does matter later, and income tax is important since it leads to recruitment of talent.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked for further clarification on sales taxes.

MR. DESAI answered that it would have a larger impact on consumer-end businesses.

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SENATOR BIRCH recalled he mentioned distance and remoteness as a hindrance; however, Anchorage and Fairbanks represent the number one cargo hub in the western hemisphere. He recalled that Fed-Ex and UPS [United Parcel Service] previously had 700 wide-body flights weekly in and out of these airports. He said that significant innovation occurs in the transportation arena in Alaska. He said he is interested in Mr. Desai's perspective on how Alaska can leverage its access to transportation to markets to build, develop, and distribute products.

MR. DESAI responded that he would discuss unmanned systems later. He clarified that when he spoke of remoteness, he was referring to how it relates to channel partnerships with other innovators. In fact, the reason that many entrepreneurs move to the [San Francisco] Bay area is to gain proximity to other startups and investors.

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CHAIR REINBOLD asked what Alaska could do to improve its national ranking, besides its current "angel funds."

MR. DESAI replied he would cover this later in his presentation.

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MR. DESAI turned to slide 4, "How do we bridge the divide and diversify the Alaskan economy?" He quoted from CityLab, The Atlantic, which said, "Cities that have the greatest startup activity also have the greatest job growth." He said the window

is 5-10 years, and while many fail the ones who succeed greatly eclipse incumbent hiring. Secondly, Alaska has significant federal spending and one avenue Alaska could explore is to look for ways to connect the federal spending to provide a cushion for startups. He cautioned that he is not trying to provide a solution since he is still trying to learn more about Alaska's economy. He pointed out his comments highlight some "seeds" that are worth considering, he said.

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CHAIR REINBOLD reconvened the meeting.

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MR. DESAI turned to slide 5, "Moonbeam has conducted a national study of where innovation is sourced in the U.S." Although Alaska is not on the list, he would like to help Alaska achieve this. He acknowledged that San Francisco and San Jose are the leaders but pointed out that innovation clusters in certain areas. For example, Seattle has a large center for "artificial Intelligence" (AI), "cloud computing," and high technology, he said. It is now moving toward "space flight" and "development technology" (DevTech). Chicago is more focused on Industry 4.0 and manufacturing, which are the traditional industries that built the city. Austin is well connected to Houston and Dallas in the oil industry, so Austin has positioned itself to be the "innovation capital" of Texas. In fact, many of the innovation companies that start in Austin are deployed by Fortune 500 companies in Houston and Dallas. He suggested Alaska should consider this model when it thinks about connections between these hubs.

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MR. DESAI turned to a sub-slide, "Cascadia Innovation Corridor." He mentioned an initiative led by Brad Smith, Microsoft, to connect the Cascadia cities of Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver to cooperate on innovation, linking angel and venture investors to governments. The goal is to build infrastructure to help ease travel between these cities, he said. He has spent the last three years immersed in virtual reality. Initially he spent significant time in Los Angeles. However, as the Cascadia Innovation Corridor has taken off and Vancouver has transitioned from its entertainment industry to embrace virtual reality, he finds he can accomplish his work in Vancouver. He offered his

belief that these cities are more similar now that their economies are better able to collaborate.

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MR. MYERS highlighted sectors that the Cascadia Innovation Corridor has broken out. He noted that PNWER chairs the Efficient People/Goods Movement Across Border Working group to help address cross-border economies. This initiative examined the economy and broke it into "buckets" and to identify champions in those sectors. The goal is to figure out how to build up those networks up and eventually connect those silos.

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MR. DESAI turned to slide 6, "Technology Valley of Death" which describes the difficulty of commercialization of new technology. This slide illustrated how a startup goes from inception to defining an economy. In particular, scientific startups receive early-stage academic grants from the government. Academic programs often work on cutting-edge technology, which typically happens about 5-10 years away from commercialization. At that point, angel investors step in to take the risk for the startup. Once it has achieved a certain level of success, venture capital will step in, followed by traditional banking. The gap between venture capital and banking is called the "Valley of Death," he said. In fact, roughly 80 percent of startups fail during that time or prior to that time.

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MR. DESAI turned to slide 7, "We have classified economic payers in four categories based on their likelihood to innovate." He said that a number of tactics can be employed to bridge the divide and acquire the right partners to develop prototype solutions. He said the disruptor must work with traditional businesses to help them create efficiencies or gain new markets. However, filling that gap is difficult. Some startups succeed by serendipity and are able to interact with other innovation labs. If it is possible to organize serendipity in niche areas, it could make sense for Alaska's economy, and could create an avenue that would lead to some success, he ventured.

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CHAIR REINBOLD referred back to slide 6, "Valley of Death" and wondered if [ABC's] "Shark Tank" has shed light on [funding for startups].

MR. DESAI agreed that "Shark Tank" is a good model, one that demonstrates "pitch sessions" for startups trying to obtain

funding. He characterized the distinction between a startup and a small business, such that small businesses tend to have perpetual contracts and revenue and are often service companies with a well-developed business model with a stable return, he said. "Shark Tank" makes it seem like these investors are immediately going to make an investment decision. However, it really takes a lot of follow-up for investors to understand the founders, their vision, and their grit, to better understand how likely they are to force their way into new market share before they invest.

MR. DESAI turned to slide 8, "Exchange." He said a lot happens due to serendipity, when an investor happens to be in the room with the startup. Startups typically seek 10-100 times return on their investment. They seek to disrupt the economy and create new market space, desire quick growth, and create a large economic impact. This is why they need venture capital, he said. Accelerators and incubators help entrepreneurs prepare for the pitch sessions. Typically, investors see as many companies as possible and churn through 20-50 five-minute pitches in a day, but only make one or two investments.

MR. DESAI offered his understanding that the state has been investigating ways to get natural gas in the northern parts of Alaska for a fleet of vehicles. That raises the question of how to compel startups to focus on that challenge throughout the nation. These startups must line up with the right buyers willing to be an "early stage customer" to potentially invest in the development of that capability. Still, many founders are looking for a great business challenge and it all centers around data, he said.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked if he had been on ABC's "Shark Tank."

MR. DESAI answered no. He worked at a large consulting firm that mentored startups, so he has attended many pitch sessions.

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MR. DESAI said, "Data is king." His primary interest is how to provide subject matter expertise to broker connections for startups. Startups are looking for lead generation and tailored opportunities that really apply to their area of expertise. They want to gain exposure across the investment community on potential customers. He has reviewed the ratio exchange of all federal government procurements, which includes all companies doing business with the federal government, he said. He related

he has also worked on partnerships with various venture capital funds, incubators, and accelerators to foster relationships between companies and investors on this platform. He said he would love to see Alaska involved in this platform.

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MR. DESAI discussed slide 10, "Use Case 1: Alaskan SBs/Startups Seeking Contracts." He related a scenario in which [Moonbeam] helped an Anchorage business, Ocean Bay, LLC. His company was able to review and find prime contract holders, determine contract ceiling on contracts, and assess other factors to help Ocean Bay, LLC connect to customers. His focus is to free up time for startups and help them make those connections, he said.

MR. DESAI turned to slide 11, "Use Case 2: Incumbent Business Scouting Innovation." He related a scenario in which his business helped the Copper River Native Corporation (CRNC) determine what patents were held in an Indiana university. The goal was to see if the corporation could market some of its capabilities, and he was ultimately able to help them source that innovation. The CRNC currently has about \$23 million in government contracts and it wants to brand itself as an innovator, he said.

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MR. DESAI turned to slide 12, "Use Case 3: Regional Economic Development Council." He worked with South Bend, Indiana, a region with a historic agriculture and manufacturing base, to repurpose large unused factories. Many companies understand the distribution of consumer-packaged goods, and this region is trying to build excellence in that arena.

He pointed out Alaska's prevalence of cargo, with the Port of Anchorage's equidistant proximity to Asia, Europe, and the Lower 48. Alaska could work to leverage the existing supply chain expertise to market the next generation of unmanned systems, he said. For example, a Seattle company works on sensors for autonomous vehicles for the automotive industry, and these sensors could be tested in Alaska. This is relevant because Alaska has volcanic activity, so the company could test whether vehicles with its sensors can operate in the presence of volcanic ash. He concluded that Alaska could analyze and pivot off data to develop those types of industries in the state.

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MR. DESAI reviewed slide 13, "A potential Alaskan Innovation Hub Network." In his preliminary research of the innovation

ecosystem in Alaska, he identified several opportunities in which Alaska could connect to the innovation proving ground, including unmanned systems, industrial internet, and industry 4.0. For example, Alaska could become an innovation proving ground for various technology companies in Seattle, especially to test equipment that must function in cold or inclement weather. Alaska could also use its expertise with large scale equipment in the mining sector. In addition, it could identify opportunities to collaborate between mining and additive manufacturing, with potential partners in South Bend, Indiana. Further, with the prevalence of federal dollars in Alaska, the state could develop unmanned systems and partner with companies who work with the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) at its military bases. Finally, he suggested Alaska could connect more with Austin, to support innovation in Houston.

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SENATOR COSTELLO said she appreciated the presentation. She offered her belief the PNWER offers many opportunities for Alaska. Recently, the committee heard from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) on the jobs forecast in Alaska. Alaska continually looks for ways to innovate and diversify its economy. She acknowledged that many jobs have come from startups in Alaska. She asked him what government's role should be. She asked whether it should provide leadership, abilities to network, or if government should provide something else. She recalled government investment in the bio-tech industry in the Lower 48, which did not work out. She further recalled the startup bio-tech companies would launch in a region but would be taken elsewhere once the companies took off.

MR. DESAI said government is not good at picking "winners and losers." However, government plays a central role in setting the conditions, creating ecosystems for startups to thrive and make it to the next level. For example, Vancouver actively collaborated with Seattle to secure investment and encourage U.S. companies to open "back" offices there. Further, Austin has encouraged technology companies to pivot to its lower cost of living and open "back" offices. Finally, Walla Walla worked to develop its expertise in the work force for the wine industry. Now Columbia Valley is one of the top wine-producing areas in the country, he said. He cautioned against government providing incentives to companies to startup in Alaska if these companies will ultimately need to move elsewhere once they experience growth. Distribution tends to be centered by companies in Boston and New Jersey, he said.

MR. DESAI acknowledged that drug development is often done with incentives and connections to medical schools and Seattle has had some success in this arena. However, in one instance a startup was ultimately bought out and their exit strategy was to relocate. All those jobs were lost and that is a gamble the state would not want to mimic. Instead, Alaska should reinforce its existing economy but move in a slightly different direction.

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SENATOR COSTELLO stated the Juneau Economic Development Council (JEDC) hosts an annual Innovation Summit in Juneau. She recalled Mr. Desai stating that government is not good at picking winners and losers. She asked whether he meant that government should pay attention and allow growth to happen organically, or if government should look for clusters in Alaska that might have opportunities for development and support them.

MR. DESAI offered three conditions that must be met. First, government could study to figure out what opportunities exist in the economy and identify key areas for startups. That type of research is typically difficult for startups to perform. Second, government could create an environment for success by bringing in the right partners. For example, Alaska could bring in delegations from industries to showcase what is available in its state. Third, government could create or organize early-stage funding opportunities to overcome the first \$50,000 financial barrier. He cautioned against government making the decisions, but it should create an environment to allow angel investors to come together and pool funds to help startups.

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MR. MYERS said that representatives from Trail, British Columbia attended a summit in Spokane last summer. One company works in metallurgical research with an initiative called "Metal Tech Alley," he said. The area once had a large smelting plant, which has subsequently disappeared. In its place, the community transitioned to become expert in metal research and testing. This has led in a "pseudo-government" method, which is an example of current best practice.

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CHAIR REINBOLD recalled that Senator Bishop emphasized the importance of affordable energy and infrastructure in Alaska. She offered her belief that amazing opportunities exist in geothermal and hydro-electric energy in the state. She asked him to discuss the importance of affordable energy to businesses.

MR. DESAI pointed out that Iceland has transformed its economy by harnessing its geothermal energy. He reiterated that data drives technology, but that some industries are dependent on energy, including data-warehousing and high-competition activities. He said he thought that was a great avenue for Alaska to explore.

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CHAIR REINBOLD reiterated the immense hydro-electric and geothermal potential in Alaska. She emphasized the importance of infrastructure in Alaska, such as Alaska's Roads to Resources program. She asked about the new Arctic channels that are opening up in northern Alaska due to ice melt. She further asked him to discuss any opportunities for Alaska on the North Slope.

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MR. MYERS related that Alaska is a member of the Arctic Caucus PNWER formed in 2009. This caucus has examined sharing best practices throughout the region. The Northwest Passage has been discussed in terms of how to leverage opportunities. He reported that PNWER has met with U.S. Congressional Delegation members and Canadian members to consider opportunities for deep water ports and infrastructure, such as icebreakers. Last week the group met with Prince Rupert's mayor, since many vessels transit its port. Prince Rupert is also interested in these opportunities and is well positioned to participate in them. He agreed that Alaska needs to continue to look for opportunities to leverage. He expressed a willingness to share anything PNWER learns with its Arctic Caucus members.

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MR. DESAI said he is not aware of any issues related to North Slope shipping. However, he said that most entrepreneurs in the Lower 48 do not have any knowledge of the issues related to shipping via the Northwest Passage.

CHAIR REINBOLD interjected and asked him to please watch this issue.

MR. DESAI went on to explain that he has experience working with the U.S. Navy, which has given him familiarity with its processes. Most entrepreneurs do not know how to access opportunities with the U.S. Navy or identify the types of technologies that could be commercialized. He offered his belief that identifying potential business opportunities and challenging them to create solutions applicable to industries is

a great way to obtain innovation that could shape Alaska's economy.

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CHAIR REINBOLD asked him to touch on national and international security issues, public safety, and recycling opportunities, especially for recycling, since Alaska wants to maintain its pristine environment.

MR. MYERS referred to the term, "circular economy." In this manner, entrepreneurs look at the life cycle of the product, how it will be reused, and how it will be sourced. He offered to share more information on what some entrepreneurs are doing in terms of the products they are creating and how it impacts the economy.

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CHAIR REINBOLD said that the mining industry and mariculture offer other opportunities in Alaska. She said she hopes to hold a hearing on the oil and gas processes from start to finish to better understand the industry and look for other opportunities.

MR. DESAI asked to delve into the mining industry. He said he did not feel qualified to offer solutions for each industry she mentioned; however, he suggested it could be crowdsourced into a broader community. He has trained soldiers using virtual reality in conjunction with the DOD, he said. Virtual reality can be used to provide the needed expertise for the military without risking soldiers' lives. Similarly, while it is not practical to train mining industry personnel to fix mining equipment using very expensive mining equipment, it is important that miners to be adept at doing so when something goes wrong. Virtual reality can provide that expertise, he said. He related several scenarios to illustrate virtual reality applications.

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SENATOR BIRCH said he attended a PNWER/LEHI (Legislative Energy Horizon Institute) program in Richland, Washington last fall. He recalled that a high-voltage direct-current (HVDC) line runs from Central Washington to Southern California. He said discussions on how to monetize natural gas resources on Alaska's North Slope are ongoing. Some people have talked about developing a HVDC to access markets. Given his electrical engineering background, he asked whether he had any suggestions.

MR. DESAI said he would love to challenge electrical engineers across the country to tackle that issue. He offered one approach

he would take is to offer graduates prizes, and spin off companies, who could potentially test their solutions in the field.

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SENATOR COSTELLO recalled the PNWER Innovation Working Group considered declassifying DOD's information and making that unclassified information available to entrepreneurs. This is an exciting opportunity because it could lead to entrepreneurs creating a business or product, she said. She asked what that process would look like if the committee or state wanted to pursue it.

MR. DESAI said he would broaden the scope of the project to encompass all technology that the federal government has developed. He said there is a process companies can use to leverage government technology and build a technology transfer platform. He mentioned the Creative Cooperative Research and Development Agreements (CRDA). [A CRDA is an agreement between a government agency and a private company or university to work together on research and development.] It is possible to identify what the government procures, but not necessarily what technology it owns, particularly in the labs. Some of the information would be mineable by startups, at the point the research and development led to commercialization, he said. From a policy perspective, the state could make it easier for startups to set up CRDAs, so that startups could work collectively with the state and federal government to leverage that technology and commercialize it. However, the CRDA process is challenging and research and development is expensive, he said.

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CHAIR REINBOLD reiterated the topics covered. She emphasized that Alaska offers numerous opportunities. She asked who serves on the Arctic Caucus.

MR. MYERS responded that Representative John Lincoln serves on the Arctic Caucus.

CHAIR REINBOLD said she attends the Council of State Government's (CSG) meeting on behalf of the state, and western states have substantial water resource issues. She asked whether he had suggestions on how Alaska can export its water.

MR. MYERS identified PNWER's Water Working Group (WWG), chaired by Senator Jim Honeyford (WA), and David Hill, [Alberta Water

Research Institute], who serves as the academic co-chair. The WWG has reviewed challenges in Washington. He noted that significant work has been done on the Columbia River Treaty. He explained that reservoirs have been created due to the dams and Washington has been examining ways to move water throughout the state for agriculture. He characterized it as more of an in-state issue. He said was unsure if the incentive to do so exists right now.

He elaborated that several initiatives in Tacoma have examined how to use current technology to protect water, using Alaska as a proving ground. In addition, PNWER has looked at contaminated water between British Columbia and Washington and "tech mining" worked on water testing methods in the area. However, he was interested in learning more about how to market Alaska's water interests, he said.

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CHAIR REINBOLD pointed out that people cannot water their lawns in some states, so it did not make sense to her that incentives did not exist. She asked for further clarification the reason that water resources were not being incentivized.

MR. MYERS clarified that viability was the issue, that currently it is too expensive to transport water.

CHAIR REINBOLD offered her belief that this is a worthy topic.

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CHAIR REINBOLD asked for a list of the PNWER committees.

MR. MYERS answered that PNWER has 18 working groups that meet during its annual meeting. Some of the PNWER working groups, include energy, water, mining, workforce development, innovation, agriculture, livestock health, border issues, tourism, and invasive species. He offered to provide the complete list to the committee. In addition, some initiatives that PNWER hosts are separate from the working groups, for example, the Legislative Energy Horizon Institute, mentioned by Senator Birch, and the Arctic Caucus, previously discussed.

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CHAIR REINBOLD remarked that Alaska also has immense opportunities for agriculture given the 24-hour daylight it has in the summer. She noted that the presentation did not touch on some opportunities, including business interests; for example,

importing Canada's cattle and pigs in order to achieve more self-sufficiency.

CHAIR REINBOLD made committee announcements.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Reinbold adjourned the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting at 2:34 p.m.