



## 2026 Arctic Encounter Summit Address

April 16, 2026 | President Pat Pitney

### **“America's Arctic University: Stronger, Ready, and Built to Lead”**

Thank you, Jackson, Rachel, and the entire AES team, for another incredible convening.

The University of Alaska has long been a proud sponsor and supporter of Arctic Encounter, and we are pleased to welcome you here again.

This is my final Arctic Encounter as president of the University of Alaska. But before I step away in May, I want to talk about this region, the work ahead, and this university system.

The University of Alaska's role in the Arctic is not tied to any one person or president. It's structural, and embedded in the ethos of the North. The valued partnerships we've built with many of you will continue. And the next president will inherit an institution deeply woven in Arctic research, policy, and Alaska and the Arctic economy. That interconnection is intentional.

The Arctic faces real and difficult challenges. Communities in this region are adapting to a changing climate that impacts daily life. There remains a significant need for an Arctic-capable and -committed workforce. And there is near-universal recognition that this region has a critical role to play in the future of our world.

That's no longer a prediction; it's our reality. We are seeing it play out in unprecedented storms and natural disasters, as well as in the new and volatile political shift.

The question, then, is whether the institutions serving and supporting this region have the ability and capacity to respond. When it comes to UA, the answer is an emphatic “yes”.

The University of Alaska is the only public university system in America's Arctic. Each of our three universities brings a distinct yet essential perspective.



Before I go further, I want to recognize the breadth and depth of UA's commitment to a better and more resilient, engaged Arctic. If you are a faculty, staff member, or student within the UA system, would you please stand?

And if you are a former faculty member, staff member, student, or affiliate, would you please stand?

Thank you so much. As you can see, our capacity is more than a collection of programs. It's the foundation built to support and partner across this state and region.

Last year, our research expenditures reached \$273 million, an all-time high with concentrations in fisheries, critical minerals, cold-climate engineering, remote energy, national security, Indigenous knowledge, and more.

But behind those numbers is a research enterprise decades in the making and still growing.

There's the Geophysical Institute at UAF, established by the U.S. Congress in 1946. The Arctic Domain Awareness Center at UAA is working directly with federal agencies, such as the Coast Guard, on security and safety issues.

There are 100+ scientists at the International Arctic Research Center. And I can't forget the research vessel Sikuliaq, which just completed a historic first voyage to Antarctica.

There is also research for Arctic communities and peoples. Take the Institute of Arctic Biology's work in the Center for Alaska Native Health Research and the importance of subsistence. And UAA's ISER, studying the economics of food security and impacts of food waste resulting from constrained rural transportation.



These are working assets, built over the better part of a century for this very moment, where the world is more and more focused on the global Arctic.

Our capacity isn't confined to large-scale programs. At UAS, researchers Eran Hood and Jason Amundson built a flood-forecasting dashboard for glacier outburst floods in Juneau. Last year, over 15,000 residents used it to predict flood conditions and protect lives and property. It's science that solves problems people are facing right now, with applications for communities around the world.

Our Arctic leaders have capitalized on that success and are helping communities in Southeast Alaska prepare for similar natural disasters.

Under the leadership of Interim UA Fairbanks Chancellor and former U.S. Arctic Ambassador Mike Sfraga, a new National Arctic Policy Center is taking shape at UA Fairbanks. It will connect federal agencies to Arctic research and directly inform foreign and domestic policy.

Remember, infrastructure doesn't solve the long-term problem. It also takes leaders. The Arctic needs leaders who will step up and guide us.

Two years ago at AES, I shared a vision for the Arctic Leadership Initiative. The premise was simple: The people who will lead this region in the next 5, 10, 20 years need to be building their networks and Arctic expertise right now.

Today, ALI's first cohort of early-career faculty and second cohort of students are becoming ALI alumni, with the next cohort slated to begin in the fall. Many of them are here at the conference, presenting research and staffing our booth in the exhibitors' hall. I'm thrilled with its success thus far, and look forward to seeing these leaders and the program continue to succeed.



What gives me confidence about their prospects is that they're not just preparing for some future Arctic: they're working on the same problems you are, and right beside you in many cases. I can't think of a better group of individuals to whom we can pass the torch.

Today, the University of Alaska is positioned for growth. Enrollment is rising. Research is at record levels. And the leadership at our Universities is strong.

We're now able to invest in partnerships and make long-term commitments to a region that requires long-term thinking.

The Arctic is more consequential now than at any other point in history. And as such, it demands serious, dedicated institutions that show up, collaborate, and drive a stronger future.

The world is coming north. As it does, the University of Alaska is ready to empower Alaska and the Arctic. We've been here for over a hundred years. And I'm confident we'll be here for a hundred more.

Thank you for all you do to support this incredible region.