Development of the Arctic is a hot topic around the world and is the subject of international conferences—forums that take place each year. Last May in Anchorage, World Trade Center Alaska, along with the Institute of the North, conducted the inaugural Arctic Ambitions Conference. The gathering concentrated on the theme of international trade and business opportunities that flow from development of the Arctic.

Working from a context of who stands to benefit most—which regions, countries, industries and companies—presenters addressed issues such as international supply chains, markets, commerce, marine transport and other subjects associated with Arctic development.

While policy and research informed the discussion, the conference concentrated on global markets, international trade and decision-making. Discussion was framed by several key Arctic industries. It addressed the two-way nature of exports and imports in the Arctic. It’s not just a question of what Arctic nations can develop and export—equally important is who has a market for those resources. Government officials and business executives from Canada, Finland, Japan, Korea, Norway, Russia and the United States participated in the conference and discussed their roles as development unfolds in the region.

With the accelerating rate of polar ice melt, massive natural resources are becoming accessible in the Arctic. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, one-quarter of the world’s undiscovered, technically recoverable oil and gas resources may be in the Arctic: oil (90 billion barrels); natural gas (1.7 trillion cubic feet); and natural gas liquids (44 billion barrels). Resource exploration in the Arctic requires significant technical assistance. For example, Arctica Shipping, a Finnish operator of an icebreaking fleet, provides service and support of offshore oil and gas exploration. The company’s icebreakers are capable of supporting offshore drilling rigs in Alaska and elsewhere in the Arctic. The president of Arctica Shipping was one of the featured speakers at the inaugural Arctic Ambitions Conference in May last year.

At the same time, there was a significant increase in maritime cargo movements through the Arctic shipping routes. The summer season of 2011 showed a rise of commercial transit via the Northern Sea Route—34 ships carried 820,000 tons of cargo. By comparison, in 2010, only 4 ships transited through the NSR and carried 111,000 tons. All but one of these vessels required an icebreaker escort. Rosatomflot, a Russian company operating a fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers in the Arctic, provided these escorts. Rosatomflot also participated in Arctic Ambitions.

With the growth of Arctic maritime infrastructure, there exists a potential for usage of Alaska ports. Ships passing through the Bering Strait could be served by ports such as Adak and Unalaska. These ports could become transshipping hubs for cargo as it passes from new Arctic shipping lanes to existing commercial routes. Currently, the Norwegian port of Kirkenes serves this function on the European side of the Northern Sea Route. One of the operators of this transshipping hub, Tschudi Shipping Co., came to Anchorage to present at Arctic Ambitions last year.

This year’s Arctic Ambitions II Conference will provide an important update on commercial activities in the Arctic and a venue for Alaska companies to hear the latest news directly from government and business leaders in the region. The conference will take place at the Hotel Captain Cook in Anchorage on Feb. 19-20; for registration information visit wtca.org or call (907) 27-TRADE.