

DRAFT

Date: January 7, 2021

We strongly oppose the proposal by the U.S. Department of State in filing 20-381 to close the two U.S. Consulates General in the Russian Federation - temporarily in Yekaterinburg, and permanently in Vladivostok. This action would severely damage the ability of the United States to monitor events and influence trends in the immense territory of the Russian Federation east of the Urals, which borders on such geo-strategically crucial countries as China, Japan, and North Korea. With China rapidly expanding its influence in the region, this is not the time for the United States to weaken its presence.

The Department of State proposal fails to appreciate the essential role the Consulates play in remote regions far from Moscow. In a country the size of Russia, these Consulates and their functions are invaluable and their local staff and regional expertise cannot be relocated to the Embassy in Moscow. Any Consulate closure will adversely affect our ability to advance core U.S. national interests and provide critical services to U.S. citizens and companies in the regions.

We particularly object to the permanent closure of the Vladivostok Consulate. The Russian Far East shares the Pacific Rim with the states of the U.S. West Coast and Alaska. These states and their citizens have for almost 30 years enjoyed wide-ranging relations with the Russian Far East in trade, tourism, education, and environmental cooperation. We stress the importance of these mutually beneficial relationships in the broader context of our relations with the Pacific Rim.

The role of the U.S. Consulate General in Vladivostok is vital to preserve and support these relationships. U.S. companies in the Russian Far East, including Exxon Neftegas Limited (an ExxonMobil subsidiary and the largest US investment in Russia), rely on the services of the Consulate General in Vladivostok. The Russian American Pacific Partnership (RAPP), a 25-year bilateral forum supporting wide-ranging cooperative relations between the region of the Russian Far East and U.S. western states, likewise relies on these services. So does a thriving ten-year exchange between botanical gardens in Eastern Russia and the Pacific Northwest, aimed at expanding environmental education. Seasonal air service that has supported tourism, trade, scientific and cultural exchanges between Alaska and the Russian Far East since 2009 depends on the Consulate for both crew and passenger visas. Multiple Sister-City relationships, and the National Park Service's "Beringia Shared Heritage Program," advance U.S. national interests by fostering healthy economic, social, and environmental ties with the Russian Far East. These are but a few examples of important activities that would be disrupted or disabled if the Consulate permanently closes.

The State Department asserts in its filing that the functions of the Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok Consulates could be smoothly taken over by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. This claim ignores the geography, logistics, and regional significance of Eastern Russia, and overestimates the Embassy's capacity to serve U.S. interests there. Eastern Russia, which stretches from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and from the Chinese border to the Arctic, stretches up to 5,000 miles and nine time zones from Moscow.

Not only Russia, but also China, Japan and North Korea would see the closure of the U.S. Consulates in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok as a U.S. retreat. It would play into the hands of opponents of democracy and freedom. This is clearly not the time for the U.S. to display weakness in its policies

toward Russia, or to diminish our ability to monitor and influence developments in the Russian regions.

We understand that the Congressional notification period has run out on filing 20-381, but we strongly urge that the incoming Biden Administration reconsider and reverse this ill-considered proposal.

Sincerely,

Anthony Allison, President, Partnerships for Nature International Environmental Education Exchange

Mark Dudley, Regional Director for North America, InterPacific Aviation and Marketing, Inc.

Rose Gottemoeller, former Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Security, U.S. State Dept.

Derek Norberg, President, Council for US-Russia Relations and Executive Director RAPP