



**TESTIMONY OF
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**ON
GUARDIANS OF THE SEA: EXAMINING COAST GUARD EFFORTS IN DRUG
ENFORCEMENT, ILLEGAL MIGRATION, AND IUU FISHING**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COAST GUARD & MARITIME TRANSPORTATION (CG&MT)
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING**

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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to be here today to discuss the United States Coast Guard's role in securing America's maritime border.

The United States is a maritime nation with 95,000 miles of shoreline and 361 commercial ports connecting 25,000 miles of navigable channels facilitating the flow of \$5.4 trillion of maritime economic commerce. The Coast Guard is a unique, complementary organization within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) enterprise. We are at all times an Armed Force, a Federal law enforcement agency, humanitarian first responders, environmental stewards, a regulatory agency, and a member of the Intelligence Community. The Coast Guard is a nimble instrument of national power. We protect the homeland, save lives, and preserve the world's ocean. I am pleased to share with you how we leverage our unique authorities, capabilities, and relationships with international, federal, state, local, and Tribal partners to operationalize a layered approach to maritime border security to protect our communities from transnational threats.

Maritime Drug Interdiction

Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) harm the American way of life. They traffic drugs, weapons, wildlife, and humans, which causes instability and violence in Central America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, driving irregular migration to the United States. Illicit drugs destined for the United States devastate American families, leading to record-setting drug-related deaths in recent years. Drug trafficking also destabilizes nations in the region undermines the rule of law, threatens citizens, and drives individuals, families, and unaccompanied children to migrate to the United States. To be clear, the flow of illicit drugs toward the United States funds TCOs, which pose a significant and growing threat to our national security, the security of nations in Central and South America, the rule of law throughout the Western Hemisphere, and governance within the maritime commons.

Today, TCOs and the illicit drugs they traffic inflict great harm here, in the United States, as well as in countries where drugs are grown and produced, and those through which the TCOs transport the drugs. The nature of the threat to America has changed over the course of this decades-long fight. Plant-based drugs such as cocaine, primarily trafficked via non-commercial maritime vessels, are still a grave threat, but illicit fentanyl, precursors, analogues, and other synthetic opioids are responsible for 70 percent of overdose deaths in the U.S. and now the greatest concern. However, almost all the illegal drugs coming from Central and South America are produced and shipped by the same TCOs. Notably, cocaine and other plant-based narcotics continue to form the foundation of TCO revenue streams, even with the increase of fentanyl and synthetic opioid trafficking operations.

Combating TCOs – Drug Interdiction in the Maritime Domain

The Coast Guard is the only Federal maritime law enforcement agency with both the authority and capability to conduct drug interdiction operations and enforce national and international law on the high seas. The Coast Guard shares the lead for U.S. territorial seas interdiction and enforcement responsibilities with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Employing our fleet of sea-going cutters, maritime patrol aircraft, helicopters, and boats, the Coast Guard takes action against drug smuggling threats far from U.S. shores where the TCOs are most vulnerable by interdicting bulk quantities of drugs at sea.

The importance of Coast Guard interdictions transcends the direct removal of drugs from the high seas. When the Coast Guard apprehends suspects from drug smuggling cases, the suspects disclose information during prosecution and sentencing that is used to help indict, extradite, and convict key criminal leaders and further disrupt and dismantle TCOs. Interdictions also take profits out of the pockets of criminal networks thereby denying them financial resources.

While more than 75 percent of the Coast Guard's interdictions in 2023 were cued by intelligence, the unexpected unavailability of the Coast Guard's aging major cutters and other assets used to detect all the cued drug events limited our ability to interdict more smuggling operations. Critical acquisitions like the Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) are vital to the long-term success of the Coast Guard's fight against TCOs. Medium endurance cutters, some that were commissioned in the 1960s, are the critical "patrol cars" in maritime interdiction efforts and are in need of replacement. Additionally, whole-of-government commitment of detection capability, particularly long-range patrol aircraft, remains critical to increasing the number of identified targets that can be interdicted.

Combating TCOs – Interagency and International Cooperation

Continued cocaine interdictions at sea are critical to the fight against illicit fentanyl because the information and evidence collected with these seizures offer law enforcement agencies and task forces the opportunity to illuminate and map the TCO networks. These interdictions represent the point at which TCOs are most vulnerable and have supported the development of law enforcement cases against major TCO leaders.

The Coast Guard continues to be a supporting component in the U.S. government's approach to identify and disrupt illicit fentanyl supply chains. In the United States, through Regional Coordinating Mechanisms, the Coast Guard routinely shares intelligence; coordinates assets for operational coverage, patrols, as well as responds; leverages resources to identify the flow of suspected fentanyl and precursors through ports across the United States; and conducts Multi-Agency Strike Force Operations with our port partners that help to further disrupt the flow of drugs.

The Coast Guard has for decades developed and maintained an extensive array of bilateral and multilateral agreements with nearly every coastal state in the Western Hemisphere. These agreements provide the framework through which the Coast Guard effectively and efficiently pursues maritime interdiction efforts in the region through a collaborative approach in the mutually beneficial fight against TCO networks. In addition to directly enhancing Coast Guard effectiveness, this international cooperation also helps build partner nation capacity to interdict drugs far from U.S. shores. In fiscal year 2023, partner nations contributed to more than 75 percent of the drug interdictions recorded by Joint Interagency Task Force South.

Migrant Interdiction

Coast Guard migrant interdiction operations are, first and foremost, ensuring safety of life at sea and upholding humanitarian principles. Every year, thousands of people attempt to migrate via maritime routes, many utilizing services of organized smuggling operations and often in dangerously overloaded, unseaworthy, or otherwise unsafe vessels. Migrants who take to the sea put their lives at incredible risk. Many of the migrant interdiction cases handled by the Coast Guard begin as search and rescue missions.

Migrant interdiction at sea is also a critical U.S. law enforcement mission. The Coast Guard, pursuant to Executive Order 12807, is charged with interdicting migrants as far from U.S. shores as possible and returning them to their countries of origin. Swift repatriation deters many individuals intending to undertake unsafe maritime migration. Upholding the principal of non-refoulement under international human rights law, during the course of migrant interdictions, when Coast Guard crews encounter migrants who manifest fear of return to their country of origin, these migrants are referred to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in accordance with U.S. policy for a protection screening to ensure they are offered protection, if appropriate. Protection from persecution or torture is an important concern during migrant interdiction operations.

Interagency Effort via Operation Vigilant Sentry (OVS)

OVS is the DHS Homeland Security Task Force-Southeast's (HSTF-SE) comprehensive, integrated, national operational plan for a rapid, effective, and unified response to maritime migration in the Caribbean utilizing combined Federal, state, and local capabilities. The primary objectives of OVS are to protect the safety of life at sea and to deter and dissuade mass migration. OVS, led by the Coast Guard Seventh District Commander, maintains interagency coordination and has remained in an elevated posture since August 2022. Although there was a downturn in irregular maritime migration in February 2023, the Coast Guard continues to make risk-informed decisions to allocate resources to key irregular maritime migration routes.

The OVS Unified Command staff continues to advocate, through strategic messaging, lawful pathways to migrate to the United States. Additionally, the Coast Guard continues to collaborate with CBP to best utilize resources to deter irregular maritime migration, increase maritime domain awareness, and work with partner nations to safely and swiftly repatriate noncitizens to their country of last departure, when appropriate.

The Coast Guard employs cutters, boats, fixed-wing aircraft, and helicopters to identify and interdict migrant vessels as far from U.S. shores as possible. After appropriate protection screening, migrants interdicted at sea are returned to their country of origin or departure via Coast Guard cutters. Key to the ability of the Coast Guard to repatriate migrants interdicted at sea are the Coast Guard's relationships and international agreements with partner nations, especially the Bahamas, Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, who agree to accept maritime repatriation of migrants from their countries (or who departed from their countries). Loss of the ability to conduct regular maritime repatriations would be detrimental to Coast Guard interdiction operations and present significant risk to migrants and Coast Guard personnel at sea.

Countering Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) Fishing

IUU fishing is a pervasive security, economic, and environmental threat with damaging effects for oceans and coastal states around the world. By some estimates, up to a third of annual global seafood catch – approximately 56 billion pounds – is associated with IUU fishing practices. IUU fishing endangers long-term ocean and ecosystem health and is a significant contributor to overfishing. It threatens global food security for over 3 billion people who rely on fish for protein and jeopardizes economic stability for 800 million people around the world who rely on fisheries for their livelihood. From an economic perspective, global IUU fishing catch – valued in the tens of billions of dollars each year, are a lucrative revenue stream for TCOs and other malign actors.

At its core, IUU fishing is a symptom of ineffective maritime governance. It is powered by economic drivers that make it profitable. These drivers are often associated with forced labor, human trafficking, and other human rights abuses. IUU fishing actors hide in areas where maritime domain awareness is lacking and seek out spaces where flag state, coastal state, and regional enforcement is either challenging or altogether non-existent. In these ways, IUU fishing vessels often operate with impunity, with little respect for a state's laws, and without regard for conservation or management measures put in place by the international community. IUU fishing practices also contribute to eroding port and maritime security, as criminal elements may use similar trade routes, landing sites, and vessels for trafficking arms, migrants, drugs, and other contraband.

The Coast Guard has been the lead U.S. agency for at-sea enforcement of fisheries laws for more than 150 years. For decades, the Coast Guard has worked to leverage its authorities and capabilities to improve both domestic and international fisheries enforcement, holding bad actors accountable, and adapting operations as fish stocks migrate and technology improves the ability to find and harvest catch.

As criminal operations become increasingly sophisticated, the Coast Guard is uniquely positioned to combat IUU fishing and uphold the rule of law through specialized capabilities, law enforcement authority, robust bilateral maritime agreements, and its role as a member of the intelligence community. However, the Coast Guard recognizes that IUU fishing is a complex global challenge, and not one that any single nation can solve alone.

Maritime Security and Fisheries Enforcement Act (M-SAFE)

In 2019, the U.S. Congress directed the creation of a working group under the M-SAFE Act specifically to address IUU fishing and related threats to maritime security, such as transnational organized crime, trafficking, and forced labor. The Coast Guard, along with the Department of State and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is a co-chair of the working group, which is composed of 21 federal agencies.

In October 2022, the M-SAFE Interagency Working Group released its National Five-year Strategy. This National Strategy established three strategic objectives to combat IUU fishing:

1. Promote Sustainable Fisheries Management and Governance
2. Enhance the Monitoring, Control and Surveillance of Marine Fishing Operations
3. Ensure Only Legal, Sustainable, and Responsibly Harvested Seafood Enters Trade

These goals are driven by national policy, laws (such as the *Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act*), and international ocean governance structures (such as U.S. membership within international Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs)). RFMOs are shining examples of multilateral, consent-based partnerships that develop legally binding conservation and management measures based on scientific evidence. For example, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), one of the first RFMOs in the world to employ a fully developed boarding and inspection protocol for high seas enforcement based on the United Nations (UN) Fish Stocks Agreement, has produced a level of governance and cooperation for long-term resource management that was previously unfeasible. The Coast Guard is proud to have been involved in the development and negotiation of the protocol, and to participate in its continuing implementation.

The more we strengthen the sovereignty of other nations, the greater their ability to resist foreign activity that negatively targets their economic resources. Alongside NOAA and the State Department, we will continue to work with priority flag states to identify gaps in fisheries management schemes, monitoring and surveillance platforms, and enforcement capabilities. The Coast Guard continues to strive to add fisheries enforcement language into pre-existing bilateral maritime law enforcement agreements with shiprider provisions and initiating new shiprider agreements. The United States currently has bilateral agreements with 12 Pacific Island and 6 African nations. These agreements are critical to assisting partner nations to maintain control and maritime domain awareness over activities in their sovereign waters and ensure compliance with national and international laws by local and distant-water fishing fleets. Additionally, these agreements promote effective counter-IUU fishing enforcement cooperation, as well as critical transfer of knowledge and expertise which increase overall capability to confront and combat IUU fishing.

The world's oceans contain shared resources, and therefore require an internationally cooperative approach toward their conservation and management. In the face of increasing challenges to global food security and growing demand for marine resources, the Coast Guard stands ready to confront IUU fishing to ensure the long-term strategic and economic viability of fish stocks. Doing so increases Maritime Domain Awareness on the high seas, enhances the Service's ability to effectively respond to a range of transnational threats, and upholds the international rules-based order in the maritime domain.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard's layered approach to maritime border security relies on our unique authorities, capabilities, and partnerships to address threats as far away from U.S. shores as possible. To do this, we must continue to invest in our workforce, re-capitalize aging assets and infrastructure, and explore and integrate new technologies that enhance interoperability with partner agencies across all levels of government, including our international partners. The Coast Guard recognizes the importance and value of working by, with, and through our partners, because we cannot do this alone.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your continued support of the Coast Guard. I would be pleased to answer your questions.