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Homeland Security

United States  
Coast Guard



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**TESTIMONY OF  
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**ON  
“DRUG INTERDICTION OPERATIONS”**

**BEFORE THE  
HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS WESTERN HEMISPHERE AND  
COAST GUARD & MARITIME TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEES**

**APRIL 29, 2014**

**Introduction**

Good morning Chairmen Salmon and Hunter, Ranking Members Sires and Garamendi, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees. It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss the Coast Guard’s Drug Interdiction mission.

Today’s Coast Guard is a direct descendant of the Revenue Cutter Service, created by Alexander Hamilton in 1790, to stem the flow of maritime contraband into the newly-formed Republic. While our missions and responsibilities have grown exponentially since then to address a variety of safety, security and stewardship concerns, our anti-smuggling roots continue to be an essential part of our service to the Nation. The Coast Guard is the lead federal maritime law enforcement agency, and the only agency with both the authority and capability to enforce national and international law on the high seas, outer continental shelf, and shoreward from the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to our inland waters. The Coast Guard is also the lead federal agency for drug interdiction on the high seas, and it shares the lead for drug interdiction in the U.S. territorial seas with Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The Department of Defense (DOD), primarily through the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), has the statutory responsibility for the air and maritime detection and monitoring (D&M) of illicit drugs bound for the U.S. in support of law enforcement agencies such as the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard supports JIATF-S by providing aircraft and other forces to the D&M mission. It also contributes cutters and personnel in leading the critical phases of maritime interdiction and apprehension (I&A) of suspect vessels and their crews, and delivers suspects, contraband, and evidence to investigators and prosecutors in support of the President’s National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS) goals.

The U.S. Government’s Drug Interdiction programs stem the supply of illegal drugs into the U.S. through at-sea interdiction and seizure of smuggling vessels carrying contraband in the maritime Western Hemisphere Transit Zone.

Though these missions most often take place in distant waters, they help to combat Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) networks that generate crime and violence throughout Central America and Mexico.

The Coast Guard's Drug Interdiction mission is characterized by continuously evolving interdiction capabilities, tactics, and authorities employed to disrupt and apprehend drug traffickers who are motivated and fueled by massive profits, unconstrained by international borders, and highly adaptive to changes in the external environment. TOC networks rapidly adjust their maritime trafficking tactics, routes and transportation modes with an ever-changing combination of boats, low profile vessels, ships, and aircraft to evade law enforcement efforts. Beyond common fishing or recreational vessels that have always had a role in drug smuggling, the non-commercial vessels used to transport the bulk of illegal drugs in recent decades have grown increasingly specialized and sophisticated, and are often designed exclusively as drug trafficking vessels. Examples include speedboats, semi- and fully-submersible vessels, vessels with hidden compartments, and vessels constructed around their illicit cargo.

To counter this challenging and dynamic threat, the Coast Guard employs a comprehensive approach to maritime counterdrug law enforcement. The cornerstones of the Coast Guard strategy are: (1) maintain a strong interdiction presence to deny smugglers access to maritime routes and deter trafficking activity; (2) strengthen ties with source and transit zone nations to increase their willingness and ability to reduce the production and trafficking of illicit drugs within their sovereign boundaries, including territorial seas; and (3) integrate counterdrug efforts in a whole-of-government approach to combat drug smuggling through increased cooperation, coordination, intelligence, and information sharing.

### **A Layered Approach to Drug Interdiction**

The Coast Guard maintains a multi-faceted, layered approach to combat TOC networks and their transport of illicit contraband from South America toward the United States via the Caribbean Sea, the Eastern Pacific Ocean, and through Central America and Mexico. The overarching strategy is to increase maritime border security through a layered system that extends beyond our land borders. This system begins overseas, spans the offshore regions, and continues into our territorial seas and our ports. The Coast Guard's mix of cutters, aircraft, boats, and deployable specialized forces, as well as international and domestic partnerships, allow the Coast Guard to leverage its unique maritime security authorities and competencies to address threats and to improve security throughout the maritime domain. Coast Guard efforts include removing illegal drugs as close to their origins in South America as possible, where drug shipments are in their most concentrated, bulk form. Moreover, these illicit cargoes are most vulnerable when they are being moved at sea. This is where the interdiction community has the highest visibility of, and best opportunity to interdict drug movements. When bulk loads reach shore, typically in Central America, they are continually broken down, cut, and smuggled on land in smaller, harder-to-detect loads. Additionally, the targeting, detection, monitoring, and interdiction of drug loads that depart the source zone may provide direct intelligence and evidence that assists U.S. and partner nation law enforcement agencies in identifying the leaders of drug trafficking organizations.

## **International Cooperation**

Layered security begins overseas. Coast Guard personnel are posted as attachés, liaisons, drug interdiction specialists, and maritime advisors within key U.S. embassies around the world. To detect, deter and counter threats as early as possible, the Coast Guard fosters strategic relationships with partner nations.

To more effectively address maritime threats in the Western Hemisphere, the United States, through the efforts of the Departments of State and Justice and the Coast Guard, has established more than 40 bilateral and multilateral maritime counterdrug agreements and operational procedures with Western Hemisphere partners. These agreements facilitate coordination of operations and the forward deployment of boats, cutters, aircraft, and personnel to deter and interdict threats close to their origin. These agreements increase the operational reach of U.S. assets, close the seams between international borders and provide the support our international partners need to better patrol and control their sovereign waters.

In partnership with the State Department, the Coast Guard sponsors semi-annual engagements with more than 30 participating countries that focus on strengthening international partnerships and disrupting illicit drug trafficking and associated violence in the transit zone. These multilateral summits were established to improve interdiction and prosecution cooperation by building regional interoperability among primary transit zone partners in the Central American and Caribbean drug smuggling vectors.

In addition, the Coast Guard provides international training and education through a variety of courses at Coast Guard training centers and “on the job training” at operational units in the U.S., and through Mobile Training Teams deployed to host countries. Exportable training is one of the Coast Guard’s most versatile and cost effective international training tools, serving an average of 2,000 international students in approximately 40 countries each year. The end state is to build and sustain capable partners that can respond to threats and conduct maritime operations vital to their interests. In 2013, the Coast Guard provided resident training to international maritime partners from 25 countries and deployed mobile training teams to 25 countries.

## **Offshore Presence**

At the forefront of detection, monitoring, interdiction, and apprehension operations, the Coast Guard deploys a variety of offshore assets against drug traffickers in the transit zone, including major cutters, long and medium range fixed-wing aircraft, Airborne Use of Force (AUF) capable helicopters, and Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETs) embarked on U.S. Navy ships and Allied Nation vessels that supplement organic Coast Guard capabilities. The Coast Guard also continues to pursue testing and future acquisition of small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS) to enhance its future interdiction capability.

Major cutters and surface combatants, combined with AUF capable aircraft and supported by long range search aircraft have continuously proven to be an incredibly effective interdiction system when employed in the Western Hemisphere Transit Zone. During a recent patrol aboard one of our new National Security Cutters, the Coast Guard tested the ScanEagle UAS, which proved to be a superb force multiplier in two separate law enforcement cases, resulting in the removal of 570 kilograms of cocaine and the detention of six suspected smugglers.

In coordination with JIATF-S, the Coast Guard also works closely with partner nations in Central and South America, leveraging their capabilities and local knowledge to improve maritime governance in the littoral regions of the transit zone that have been increasingly exploited by illicit smuggling networks. Closer to home, Coast Guard Operational Commanders work across the interagency to provide a robust presence in the U.S. maritime approaches by deploying patrol boats, pursuit-capable small boats, medium range fixed-wing aircraft, and land-based AUF capable helicopters. The Coast Guard capitalizes on the unique authorities and capabilities of interagency partners to bring a unified, whole-of-government effort to defend our nation from threats posed by illicit actors. The Coast Guard continually seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its surface and air assets that support the drug interdiction mission and the Administration's National Drug Control Strategy.

Since 1995, the Coast Guard has interdicted more than 500 vessels transporting shipments of cocaine from South America. This includes the arrest or detention of nearly 2,000 smugglers. Over the last five years, Coast Guard Cutters and LEDETs operating in the offshore regions of the transit zone have removed more than 500 metric tons of cocaine, with a wholesale value of nearly \$17 billion.

### **Domestic Partnerships**

Closer to U.S. shores, the Coast Guard coordinates and conducts joint operations with other Department of Homeland Security components and interagency partners in a whole-of-government response to drug trafficking.

The Regional Coordinating Mechanism (ReCoM) is a good example of the evolution of coordinated domestic operations. The ReCom located in Puerto Rico, and the three ReComs in the California Coastal Region cities of San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, coordinate with the Department of Justice (DOJ) and consist of personnel from the Coast Guard, CBP, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), DOD, and state and local law enforcement agencies. The ReCoMs provide a structured and joint approach to coordinated air and maritime interdiction operations by fostering collaborative law enforcement operations as members share criminal information, plans and strategies, and use multiagency operations to target TOC activities in the maritime domain.

To counter the drug smuggling threat in waters off Southern California, the Coast Guard, in partnership with other federal, state, and local agencies, increased its commitment to the standing Coast Guard Operation *Baja Tempestad*. This combined operation brings coordinated resources to detect and interdict the panga boats smuggling drugs and migrants up the California coast.

Assets include flight deck-equipped cutters with airborne and surface use-of-force capability; Coast Guard and CBP maritime patrol aircraft flights; non-compliant vessel use-of-force endgame capabilities from our shore based boats; the recent addition of shore-based Coast Guard helicopter AUF, and enhanced intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination. In 2013, this interagency effort resulted in the removal of more than 90,900 pounds of marijuana and the apprehension of over 400 undocumented migrants attempting illegal entry into the United States.

In Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Coast Guard is part of a broad federal effort to strengthen the region's defenses against the scourge of drug trafficking. The Coast Guard is conducting targeted surge operations in the maritime domain and collaborating with international stakeholders to stem the flow of illicit drugs into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. As a result of these joint efforts, 24,000 kilograms of cocaine and 9,500 pounds of marijuana were removed in 2013.

### **Conclusion**

Our authorities, capabilities, competencies, and partnerships provide the President, Secretaries of Homeland Security, Defense and State and other national leaders with a ready force and the capabilities to lead or support a range of operations to ensure safety, security, and stewardship in the maritime domain. Through this interconnected system, the Coast Guard stands ready to meet offshore, coastal, and inland drug trafficking threats in the maritime domain. We execute our interdiction mission through our efforts to improve maritime domain awareness to our international and domestic partnerships, and investments in cutter, boat and aircraft recapitalization.

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