



Testimony
of

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Regarding a Hearing
on

*“From Cartels to Coastlines:
An Examination of U.S. Federal Efforts to Confront Illicit Maritime Activities in U.S. Waters”*

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security
Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement

June 10, 2025
Washington, DC

Introduction

Chairman Gimenez, Chairman Guest, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Correa and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am thankful for your enduring support of the United States Coast Guard and honored to be here today to discuss the Service's role in controlling, securing, and defending 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 dollars of maritime economic commerce. More than 90% of overseas trade cargo enters or leaves the United States by ship. As a vital instrument of national power within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Coast Guard is one of the six military services, a federal law enforcement agency, and member of the Intelligence Community. We control, secure, and defend the U.S. border and maritime approaches from maritime threats; ensure the safe and secure flow of commerce; respond to natural disasters; and save lives. I am pleased to share with you how we leverage our unique authorities, capabilities, and relationships with international, federal, state, local, and tribal partners, and how we operationalize a layered approach to securing our maritime border and protecting our communities from Transnational Criminal Organizations and other maritime threats.

Transnational Criminal Organizations pose a significant threat to our nation's maritime border security, as they operate across national boundaries, smuggling illicit drugs like cocaine, fentanyl, heroin, and methamphetamine into the United States, bringing violence, death, destruction, and crime into our communities. These commodities provide lucrative revenue streams that fund terrorism and other nefarious activities such as the trafficking of people, weapons, and illicit goods, destabilizing the region and promoting illegal migration – we must continue to take action against these organizations. No single agency can dismantle this threat alone.

U.S. Coast Guard Authorities, Responsibilities, & Capabilities

The Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime law enforcement, including drug interdiction on the high seas; we share the lead for drug interdiction in U.S. territorial seas with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The Coast Guard partners with the Department of Defense through Joint Interagency Task Force - South for detection and monitoring of illicit drugs bound for the United States. Coast Guard drug interdictions historically focused on cocaine and marijuana, and serve the whole-of-government effort to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations. Cocaine interdictions at sea cut off a critical source of funding for the same Transnational Criminal Organizations that produce and smuggle fentanyl, and in turn impair their efforts to produce and smuggle fentanyl into the United States. Furthermore, our Coast Guard Intelligence personnel work closely with our Intelligence Community partners to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations that threaten the U.S.

Coast Guard forces deploy to the two major drug transit corridors in the Western Hemisphere, the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean, to deter, detect, and interdict maritime drug trafficking events. Coast Guard deployments are complementary to U.S. Navy, Canadian, British, and Dutch naval deployments with embarked Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments, capitalizing on the Coast Guard's authorities and expertise to interdict narcotics before they approach our borders.

These surface assets are supported by Coast Guard, CBP Air and Marine Operations, U.S. Navy, and Dutch fixed-wing aircraft, and are of critical importance to the detection and monitoring of these Transnational Criminal Organizations. This has proven to be a successful approach and asset composition.

In addition to our at-sea assets and Law Enforcement Detachments, the Coast Guard maintains a physical presence in 30 countries around the world to serve in various capacities to include security cooperation officers, maritime advisors, attachés, liaisons, interdiction and prosecution team support, or technical experts. Through these integrated touchpoints, we work with our partners to identify challenges to overcome and opportunities to increase their capabilities to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations inside their own borders and maritime jurisdictional zones. The Coast Guard maintains more than 40 bilateral maritime law enforcement agreements that enable operations on partner nation flagged vessels suspected of illicit trafficking on the high seas and in waters subject to their jurisdiction. These types of international activities enable partner nations to increase the expertise of their workforce, enhance their maritime capabilities, and empower regional countries to lead coordinated efforts to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations at the source.

Along the U.S. coast, the Service's sectors, boat stations, air stations, and patrol boat fleet provides an integrated law enforcement capability that protects our shores from invasion. These assets and skilled personnel work closely with interagency partners to identify and interdict illegal smuggling activities that seek to traffic drugs and aliens across the border.

Approximately 80% of drug seizures each year occur in the maritime domain in operations executed by the Coast Guard and its interagency and international partners. Year-over-year, seizures by Coast Guard personnel account for roughly 50% of all drug seizures by U.S. law enforcement conducted in the transit and arrival zones. In FY 2024, the Coast Guard removed over 106 metric tons of cocaine, bringing our six-year total to 873.5 metric tons removed. To date in FY 2025, the Coast Guard has removed 135 metric tons of cocaine from the maritime domain, including a February offload of over 16.9 metric tons of cocaine worth over \$275 million that will never hit the streets and poison the American people. Our layered approach to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations as far away from U.S. shores as practical is successful only through security cooperation and integrated deployments and engagements.

Southeast Border & Maritime Approaches

The southeast maritime approaches to the United States experience significantly higher levels of irregular maritime migration than other maritime vectors and present the greatest risk of a mass migration event. Primary nationalities encountered in this region are Cubans, Haitians, and Dominicans. Cuban and Haitian aliens primarily use transit routes into Florida directly or via the Bahamas. Dominican and some Haitian aliens tend to transit routes across the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Common conveyances used in this region range from fishing vessels, coastal freighters, sail freighters, go-fast type vessels, or rudimentary vessels called "rusticas." With the leadership of the DHS Secretary, the Coast Guard maintains an increased and active presence in these regularly transited vectors to quickly respond to reports of suspicious vessels by international, federal, state, and local partners, and deter departures from countries of origin.

Southwest Border & Maritime Approaches

The southwest maritime border vector continues to record above average illegal maritime migration events, but not to the same historical magnitude as in the southeastern maritime approaches. However, human smugglers rely primarily on “panga”-style personal watercraft and makeshift vessels with a capacity of approximately 30 aliens to continuously attempt illegal entries. Although aliens with a variety of nationalities are interdicted in this vector, the vast majority are Mexican. The Coast Guard relies heavily on CBP, our partners for processing.

The Gulf of America

In the Gulf of America, illegal maritime migration events are organized and facilitated by human smuggling networks. In response to the national emergency on the border, the Coast Guard surged assets to the Rio Grande and is leveraging the capabilities of our deployable specialized forces to assist the United States Border Patrol in detecting and deterring aliens attempting to illegally cross the river. In FY 2025, the Coast Guard has interdicted or deterred over 50 illegal aliens in the region. In these cases, the Coast Guard works with regional interagency partners to transfer interdicted aliens ashore to CBP.

Due to a perceived lack of legal consequences, illegal fishing activity by Mexican small craft fishing boats (“lanchas”) in our Exclusive Economic Zone has continued to increase over the last 25 years, with the recidivism rate of many offenders exceeding 90%. One recently apprehended offender was previously caught by the Coast Guard more than 40 times. The Coast Guard has worked diligently with the interagency over the last several months to address this issue by enabling criminal prosecution of lancha crews. In one of the first cases pursued with this new approach, on May 13, 2025, a grand jury in Brownsville, Texas indicted four suspects for illegally harvesting red snapper in U.S. waters.

Northern Border

The northern border is expansive and diverse, with numerous islands and waterways. The short distances between United States and Canadian territorial seas create unique opportunities for nefarious actors to exploit vulnerable maritime areas with a relatively small law enforcement presence. Maritime security threats along the northern border include both illegal maritime migration and drug trafficking.

To combat these threats and secure our northern border, the Coast Guard and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have developed a program to train and designate law enforcement officers to co-crew boats and aircraft to enforce Canadian and United States federal laws on either side of the shared border. These operations provide the ability to share encrypted Automatic Identification System data to vastly improve cross-border domain awareness and provide a common tactical picture. Coast Guard and Royal Canadian Mounted Police teams conducted 123 cross-border operations in Fiscal Year 2024, resulting in over 500 boardings, fifteen violations, and actively deterred illicit activity. This program exemplifies the collaborative efforts between the Coast Guard, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, CBP, and other state and local law enforcement working in concert to prevent Transnational Criminal Organizations from exploiting our northern border and endangering the American people.

Combatting Fentanyl

Combatting Fentanyl and its illegal precursors is one of the Administration's top priorities and the Coast Guard has taken significant action. Fentanyl has been the leading cause of U.S. drug-related deaths since 2016, accounting for approximately 70% of U.S. drug overdose deaths in 2023. Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations are the primary source of synthetic opioid flow into the U.S., predominantly across our southwest border. While bulk fentanyl has not been encountered in the maritime domain, the Coast Guard is leveraging our broad authorities, capabilities, and policies to seek out and interdict both fentanyl and illegal precursor chemicals. On January 31, 2025, the Acting Commandant directed immediate action to bolster operations to combat illegal fentanyl and the Service is seeking new ways to leverage our broad authorities and partnerships with other agencies.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard provides the nation a tremendous return on investment. We control, secure, and defend the borders and maritime approaches in direct support of President Trump's Executive Orders. In order to conduct these vital missions, we must continue to invest in our workforce, re-capitalize aging assets and infrastructure, and integrate new technologies to position the Service to dismantle the Transnational Criminal Organizations that threaten our citizens and interdict aliens attempting to illegally enter our country. Thank you for your continued support of the Coast Guard and our work to ensure the safety and security of the American people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.