



Testimony
of

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on

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

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Introduction

Chairman Gimenez, Chairman Guest, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Correa, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Air and Marine Operations' unwavering commitment to interdicting illegal drugs, preventing human smuggling, and securing our nation's borders, maritime domain, and approaches. As a frontline law enforcement component of CBP, Air and Marine Operations operates in source and transit zones, between ports of entry, in coastal waters, and interior waterways.

Born out of the legacy U.S. Customs Service, Air and Marine Operations was established in 2006 as an integral part of CBP's comprehensive border security mission and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) risk-based and multi-layered approach to national security. Air and Marine Operations agents are federal law enforcement officers¹ with a broad range of legal authorities, specialized assets, and unique operational capabilities that enable them to detect and interdict illegal activity at and beyond our nation's borders in the land, air, and sea domains, providing a critical layer of continuity in border security operations.

State of the Maritime Border

While CBP reasserts control of our borders² in accordance with President Trump's directives, transnational criminal organizations and foreign terrorist organizations continue their efforts to smuggle people and contraband into our country. These organizations operate with immense capability, capacity, and nearly unlimited resources. Their smuggling operations are sophisticated, and they continually adjust their tactics, techniques, and routes to circumvent detection and interdiction by law enforcement.

Illicit activity in the maritime environment is a threat to U.S. border and national security. The maritime domain is generally less restricted than the air and land environments. Thousands of vessels enter or operate in U.S. territorial waters every day. Detecting illegal activity can be challenging, as many smuggling craft hide in plain sight among legitimate traffic, while others transit remote areas far offshore to try to elude detection. Additionally, smugglers use a variety of craft tailored to the area and cargo they are smuggling, including modified fishing boats, go-fast vessels, pangas,³ low profile vessels, and semi-submersibles. Vessels are much faster than they were 20 years ago, often leaving law enforcement little time to interdict them before reaching our shores.

Encounters with smugglers can also be extremely dangerous. Since its creation in 2006, Air and Marine Operations has used disabling fire on the engines of fleeing smuggler vessels nearly 350 times. Additionally, in November 2022, three Air and Marine Operations Marine Interdiction Agents were shot – and one of them, Michel Maceda, tragically killed -- during a vessel stop off the coast of Puerto Rico.⁴ Precise engagement and rapid neutralization of risk is key to safely resolving water-based law enforcement actions. Air and Marine Operations continually refines its maritime interdiction capabilities and tactics to meet ever evolving threats.

¹ 6 U.S.C. § 211(f); 19 U.S.C. § 1589a; 8 U.S.C § 1357

² <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/04/28/100-days-most-secure-border-american-history>

³ A small boat, often used for fishing, and typically powered by an outboard motor.

⁴ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/speeches-and-statements/cbp-marine-interdiction-agent-dies-line-duty-near-puerto-rico>

Air and Marine Operations' Maritime Border Security Operations

Air and Marine Operations remains at the forefront of the nation's efforts to combat drug smuggling and illegal immigration through the maritime domain. Immediately following President Trump's declaration of a national emergency at the southern border, Air and Marine Operations – in concert with our other CBP and DHS partners – took action to expand its maritime enforcement efforts and safeguard the American people.

With the historic decrease in illegal crossings in the land environment, Air and Marine Operations realigned maritime aircraft and increased patrols, resulting in a 90 percent increase in maritime apprehensions of illegal aliens in Southern California.⁵ Since January 21, 2025, Air and Marine Operations enforcement efforts across all our maritime operational environments have led to the apprehension of over 750 aliens, with 60 percent occurring in South Florida and the Caribbean Sea.

Aliens attempting to make the journey to the United States along maritime routes take an enormous risk, putting their lives in the hands of transnational criminal organizations, foreign terrorist organizations, or other human smuggling networks and often in unsafe, rustic vessels. The weather at sea is unpredictable, and the vessels that make it far enough for Air and Marine Operations to encounter are often dangerously overloaded with illegal aliens. Air and Marine Operations encounters with these vessels typically become rescue missions in addition to apprehension actions. Just last month, Air and Marine Operations responded to reports of an overturned panga-style boat that washed ashore in San Diego.⁶ At least three people died, including one child. Another child on board was never recovered and is presumed dead. Not only was the vessel unsuitable for the quantity of people on board, but it was also incapable of handling the perilous sea conditions. This event was another tragic reminder of how smugglers operate with total disregard for human life. Secretary Noem is seeking capital punishment for these crimes.⁷

In addition to responding to increasing numbers of maritime alien encounters, Air and Marine Operations continues to intercept tons of dangerous illicit drugs, keeping them from reaching our shores and communities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, Air and Marine Operations enforcement efforts led to the seizure of 233,662 pounds of illegal drugs.⁸ Approximately 76 percent of these drugs – including more than 160,000 pounds of cocaine, 15,000 pounds of marijuana, and 170 pounds of methamphetamine – were intercepted in the maritime environment.

Air and Marine Operations remains vigilant and continually adjusts our operations as transnational criminal organizations, foreign terrorist organizations, and human smugglers seek to shift their criminal activities from longstanding land-based pathways to alternative maritime routes.

⁵ From January 21, 2025 – May 19, 2025, compared to the same date range in 2024.

⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/five-charged-human-smuggling-event-led-least-three-deaths>

⁷ <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/05/06/secretary-noem-requests-death-penalty-against-alleged-human-smugglers-whose-actions>

⁸ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics/air-and-marine-operations-statistics>

Maritime Enforcement Authorities

Despite Air and Marine Operations' unique cross-domain law enforcement capabilities, in the maritime environment, Air and Marine Operations' maritime law enforcement authority⁹ is generally limited¹⁰ to areas within the historical "customs waters"¹¹ – or 12 nautical miles from the coastline – of the United States. This constraint limits Air and Marine Operations' ability to effectively counter current and evolving modern threats in the maritime environment.

Specifically, as modern technology continues to change and advance rapidly, the performance and speed of maritime vessels improves, including those used to violate U.S. law or evade U.S. law enforcement. These advancements render Air and Marine Operations' authority to operate only within the 12-nautical-mile zone inadequate, placing our law enforcement capability at a significant disadvantage and often preventing Air and Marine Operations' interdiction of vessels in time to prevent their escape.

CBP appreciates our continuing collaboration with Congress on legislative changes that would extend the limits of customs waters. Expansion of Air and Marine Operations' authority to operate, through the extension of the 12-nautical-mile customs waters, would enable Air and Marine Operations to better leverage its cross-domain authorities, enhance its detection of and response to the modern and sophisticated capabilities of smugglers and transnational criminal organizations, and better support its law enforcement partners in the maritime environment.

Interdiction Assets, Capabilities, and Technology

Air and Marine Operations is committed to its maritime security mission and continues to make investments in its highly trained agents, vessels, aircraft, and technological capabilities to advance the effectiveness of its operations. These investments not only support Air and Marine Operations' ongoing ability to effectively respond to illegal drug activity in the maritime environment but also contribute to other Air and Marine Operations enforcement actions, including those that led to over 1,000 arrests as well as the seizure of 1,500 weapons and \$12.6 million in U.S. currency in FY 2024.

Specialized law enforcement personnel are essential to Air and Marine Operations' maritime border security mission. These highly skilled agents must be capable of not only enforcing a broad range of U.S. laws, but also safely and effectively doing so in the complex – and often dangerous -- maritime environment. While recruitment for these positions can be challenging, Air and Marine Operations is actively pursuing opportunities to attract and onboard qualified talent at all levels of experience. We are focused on maximizing the capacity of our marine units in the Caribbean, South Florida, and Southern California where we have a high tempo of maritime activity.

Vessels tailored for Air and Marine Operations' specific law enforcement operations are a key aspect of its maritime border security mission. For example, Air and Marine Operations deploys

⁹ See, e.g. 19 U.S.C. §§ 1581, 1587, 1589a.

¹⁰ In certain circumstances, Air and Marine Operations is authorized to operate on the high seas, for instance when enforcing laws on U.S. registered vessels (19 C.F.R. § 162.3), hovering vessels (19 U.S.C. § 1401(k); 19 U.S.C. § 1587(a)), and vessels subject to hot pursuit (19 U.S.C. § 1581(d)). Additionally, beyond the customs waters, Air and Marine Operations may enforce the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. §§ 70501-70502), where appropriate.

¹¹ 19 U.S.C. §§ 1401(j), 1709(c).

a fleet of high-speed Coastal Interceptor Vessels engineered for rapid pursuit and interdiction of non-compliant vessels. These vessels are crewed by highly trained agents authorized to use all necessary force, including warning shots and disabling fire, to stop fleeing vessels.

In addition to our maritime interdiction efforts with our marine interceptors on the water, we also contribute a significant amount of air assets to these operations. Air and Marine Operations' fleet of maritime patrol aircraft are functionally designed and outfitted for maritime detection and surveillance. The P-3s and DHC-8 aircraft provide long range, high-endurance capabilities in remote source and transit zones while the Super King Air 350 Multi-Role Enforcement Aircraft further expand aerial surveillance, closing detection and enforcement gaps in the Caribbean. Equipped with advanced sensors, communications, and radar systems, these aircraft are credited with the interdiction of 150,380 pounds of cocaine and 11,670 flight hours within the Western Hemisphere Transit Zones in FY 2024, which equated to 13 pounds of narcotics interdicted per flight hour.

The use of unmanned aircraft systems in the maritime environment has also increased Air and Marine Operations' ability to effectively identify, detect, monitor, and track conveyances involved in illegal activity. In partnership with DHS's Science and Technology Directorate, Air and Marine Operations modified two MQ-9s to Big Wing variants, significantly increasing fuel capacity and flight endurance. These Big Wing aircraft have the added ability to surveil surface targets much longer while awaiting interdiction surface forces to arrive. Air and Marine Operations has been employing unmanned aircraft systems in the maritime environment since 2020, contributing to the seizure of over 81,000 pounds of cocaine and 46,000 pounds of marijuana.

Air and Marine Operations is heavily invested in a variety of ground-based radars and sensors increasing maritime domain awareness along our littoral borders. We strategically deployed several maritime approach surveillance towers in the Caribbean Basin that overlap to provide persistent wide-area surveillance and detection capabilities in high-risk areas. Additionally, we've taken tethered aerostats traditionally used for air detection and integrated maritime surface radars to utilize them in support of maritime interdiction operations. These tools have significantly increased our situational awareness of the maritime approaches around Puerto Rico, South Texas into the Gulf of America, and the Florida Straits. Other tower and ground-based radar systems have provided additional radar detection around Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, South Florida, and the Great Lakes. Over the last three years, these systems have cumulatively contributed to the seizure of over 17,200 pounds of cocaine, 15,600 pounds of illegally obtained marine life from illicit fishing practices, and \$2 million in U.S. currency.

Advanced technology, including the BigPipe real-time video system and the Minotaur mission integration system, link Air and Marine Operations' tactical assets, aircraft, and vessels, thereby providing Air and Marine Operations with a streamlined and efficient information collecting and sharing capability. The Air and Marine Operations Center simultaneously tracks, processes, and integrates multiple sensor feeds and sources of information to provide comprehensive domain awareness in support of CBP's border security mission.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning initiatives at Air and Marine Operations are improving threat detection efforts by processing vast amounts of surveillance data in real time. By leveraging artificial intelligence, Air and Marine Operations is advancing the efficiency and effectiveness of our maritime domain awareness. In areas where there is a high concentration of recreational vessels, Air and Marine Operations uses artificial intelligence technology to assist in filtering nefarious from recreational traffic. We have had success in using this technology to build algorithms that can identify patterns among a high volume of tracks on the radar.

Air and Marine Operations will continue to modernize its fleet and sensor systems to enhance its data analysis capabilities and operational performance in diverse marine environments and increase its ability to adapt to the challenges of securing the maritime border and approaches to the United States.

Operational Coordination

Using a whole of government approach, Air and Marine operations leverages interagency partnerships through the Global Maritime Operational Threat Response Coordination Center including the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of State, Department of Defense, as well as collaborations with other state, local, tribal, and foreign partners. Air and Marine Operations works closely with DHS Joint Task Force East and is one of the largest contributors of flight hours to Joint Interagency Task Force South, supporting counternarcotics operations in the 42 million square miles of source and transit zones spanning the Pacific, Atlantic, and Caribbean. Frequent cooperation with foreign partners is imperative. Over the last few years, Air and Marine Operations has increased its focus on the Eastern Caribbean and strengthened partnerships in the Lesser Antilles, creating a force multiplier of surveillance and interdiction assets throughout the southern approaches to Puerto Rico.

Conclusion

Since its creation in 2006, Air and Marine Operations has evolved into one of the world's largest civilian forces for aviation and maritime law enforcement. A critical component of CBP's border security mission, Air and Marine Operations monitors and patrols vast areas of air, sea, and land around the clock, defending the United States against threats at and beyond our borders.

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