

# Kristi Noem Faces Backlash After Ordering Coast Guard Search Plane to Abandon Rescue for Deportation Mission

---

**IBT** [ibtimes.co.uk/controversy-coast-guard-resource-allocation-1779804](https://ibtimes.co.uk/controversy-coast-guard-resource-allocation-1779804)

Christelle May Napiza

February 17, 2026

In a dispute that has shaken the ranks of the United States Coast Guard and rippled across federal law enforcement communities, [Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem](#) is facing unprecedented criticism for her handling of a high-stakes search-and-rescue operation and the prioritisation of deportation flights. The controversy centres on a February 2026 incident when a Coast Guard aircraft involved in search efforts for a missing serviceman was reportedly redirected to support migrant deportation logistics at the instruction of Noem, according to multiple Coast Guard and government officials familiar with internal deliberations.

The allegation has drawn sharp rebuke from both within the Coast Guard's senior leadership and from policymakers across the political spectrum, who contend that the order undermined the service's core lifesaving mission and strained already limited aviation resources.

## High-Level Tension Inside DHS

---

The fissure between [Noem and Coast Guard leadership](#) reportedly began days after she assumed the role of Secretary of Homeland Security, when Seaman Bryan K Lee, aged 23, was reported missing overboard from the cutter Waesche during operations in the Eastern Pacific. Hours into the search, a Coast Guard C-130 aircraft tasked with transporting detained migrants from California to Texas was assigned to the search zone, according to two US officials and a current Coast Guard official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

At that point, Noem allegedly verbally instructed Acting Commandant Admiral Kevin Lunday to pull the aircraft from the search-and-rescue mission so it would not miss its migrant deportation flight under the Department of Homeland Security's 'Alien Expulsion Operations'. The acting commandant relayed the order to the Coast Guard's National Command Centre, which directed the C-130 to return to its scheduled mission, even as naval and aerial assets continued the search for Lee.

A regional Coast Guard command in San Diego scrambled two alternative C-27 aircraft to ferry the detained migrants to Texas, allowing the C-130 to rejoin the search roughly an hour later, a manoeuvre that officials said reflected internal resistance to the directive. Despite the efforts of ships and aircraft fanning out over 19,000 square miles for 190 hours, the coastguardsman was never found, and the search was ultimately suspended.

## Crisis of Confidence Within the Coast Guard

---

Senior Coast Guard officials have privately expressed profound concern about the effects of resource reallocation on mission readiness, morale, and operational focus. A former Coast Guard official described the situation as a clash of institutional cultures, with the branch's historic search-and-rescue identity at odds with escalating border enforcement missions. 'The primary mission was search-and-rescue', the former official said, noting that under recent priorities counternarcotics and migrant deportations now rank above lifesaving operations in some planning directives.

Other current and former officials highlighted how Coast Guard aviation units have been called upon with increasing frequency to support immigration enforcement. Coast Guard aircraft transports carrying migrants surged from 14 flights in June to 149 by November under Noem's leadership, a tenfold increase that has stressed limited resources. Another former official reportedly described operations morale at the service's headquarters as 'terrible', citing uncertainty and frustration among senior leaders over mission prioritisation.

## Official Responses and Denials

---

The Department of Homeland Security has strongly disputed the narrative presented by Coast Guard officials. In response to inquiries, a DHS spokesperson characterised claims of diverting aircraft away from the search as 'politicised' and 'incorrect', asserting that 'the Coast Guard is always ready to respond to search and rescue missions, and it carefully balances all operations and mission requirements'. DHS further contended that the C-130 'never left the search' and that there is no formal documentation indicating it was diverted from the mission.

Despite official denials, unnamed defence and government sources have continued to provide consistent accounts of a directive that prioritised deportation logistics over active search operations.

A 23-year-old Coast Guardsman goes missing at sea. Search-and-rescue underway. Kristi Noem allegedly tried to redirect an aircraft away from the rescue mission for migrant transport. Nine days into her tenure as DHS Secretary, this is how it began. That tells you everything. <https://t.co/nP3oWQzcsS>

— Olivia of Troye (@OliviaTroye) [February 17, 2026](#)

## Broader Implications for Coast Guard Missions

---

The incident has ignited broader questions about the Coast Guard's evolving role within the DHS framework and the implications of political priorities on operational effectiveness. Traditionally heralded for lifesaving and maritime safety, the Coast Guard now finds itself executing expanded border enforcement and deportation tasks that some senior officers say conflict with their principal mandate.

Kristi Noem's DHS Spokesperson Suddenly Quits as Immigration Agency Faces Mounting Crisis and Political Fury

Read more

[Kristi Noem's DHS Spokesperson Suddenly Quits as Immigration Agency Faces Mounting Crisis and Political Fury](#)

Regions such as Coast Guard Air Station Sacramento have reportedly issued new guidance that elevates migrant transport flights over search and rescue operations, further exacerbating internal tensions. Public scrutiny has also sharpened around the practice of repurposing branch assets for politically charged priorities, sparking debate among former service members, lawmakers, and advocacy groups.

The controversy over the alleged diversion of a Coast Guard search-and-rescue aircraft at the behest of the Homeland Security Secretary has laid bare a profound institutional challenge: reconciling the traditional lifesaving ethos of a military service with evolving federal immigration enforcement priorities.

The episode has become a touchstone in the ongoing national dialogue over immigration policy, executive authority, and the very purpose of one of America's oldest uniformed services.