

U. S. Department of
Homeland Security

United States
Coast Guard



Commandant
United States Coast Guard

2703 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20593-7000
Staff Symbol: CG-0921
Phone: (202) 372-4411
FAX: (202) 372-8300

**TESTIMONY OF
VICE ADMIRAL DANIEL B. ABEL
DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR OPERATIONS**

**ON
WESTERN HEMISPHERE DRUG INTERDICTION OPERATIONS**

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

JUNE 4, 2019

Introduction

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of this committee. It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss the United States Coast Guard's drug interdiction mission and our role in combating Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs).

Drug trafficking has destabilized regional states, undermined the rule of law, terrorized citizens, and driven both families and unaccompanied children to migrate to the U.S. To be clear, the flow of illicit drugs funds TCOs, which, in turn, pose a significant and growing threat to national and international security.

The Coast Guard leverages 229 years of experience addressing a full range of national security and safety concerns. The Coast Guard is a unique branch of the nation's five armed services, and serves as the United States' premier agency for maritime law enforcement, whose broad array of authorities, capabilities, competencies, and partnerships are vital to successful mission execution. The Coast Guard is the lead and only federal maritime law enforcement agency with both the authority and capability to enforce national and international law, including drug interdiction, 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).

Additionally, the White House's Director of National Drug Control Policy designated the Coast Guard Commandant as the Chairman of The Interdiction Committee (TIC). TIC is a senior interagency forum, with drug control representatives from twenty-six different departments and agencies, which meets to discuss and resolve issues related to the coordination, oversight, and integration of international, border, and domestic drug interdiction efforts countering networks in support of the President's *National Drug Control Strategy* (NDCS).

TIC supports the NDCS by developing interagency recommendations to promote information sharing and integrating detection, monitoring, and law enforcement activities with interdiction efforts to more effectively disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking transportation and distribution systems.

In addition to national interagency partners, the Coast Guard maintains an extensive array of bilateral and multilateral agreements with nearly every coastal state in the Western Hemisphere. These agreements support the Coast Guard in effectively and efficiently leading maritime interdiction efforts in the region including a collaborative approach to the mutually beneficial fight against TCO networks.

For over two centuries, guided by the Coast Guard's motto, *Semper Paratus – Always Ready*, the Service has built a reputation as one of the most agile and adaptive agencies within the Federal Government. These qualities have served the Nation in the Coast Guard's efforts to combat smugglers' ever-evolving conveyances and tactics. Coast Guard interdictions routinely uncover linkages to drug trafficking organizations operating throughout South and Central America, including the Mexico-based Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation (CJNG) cartels and the Colombia-based Clan del Golfo cartel, with numerous criminal networks identified that operate independently of other named organizations. We have identified hundreds of actionable targets, from ground based coordinators, facilitators, financiers, recruiters, and others who facilitate the maritime transportation of narcotics to the United States and partner nations. Even the recent conviction of "El Chapo" links to evidence gathered through Coast Guard maritime interdictions. Over the last three years, over 1,800 smugglers apprehended at sea by the Coast Guard were delivered to the U.S. Department of Justice for their roles in enabling criminal activity and drug smuggling efforts. In fiscal year 2018, Coast Guard interdictions were instrumental in disrupting 82 percent of detected Consolidated Priority Organizational Targets, or drug kingpins, in support of Joint Interagency Task Force–South (JIATF-South). The Coast Guard also partners with the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force's (OCDETF's) Maritime Strike Forces to combat national and international drug trafficking organizations, and has representation at the Associate Director level at the OCDETF Executive Office.

From 1973 through 1991, the Coast Guard removed over 26 million pounds of marijuana, targeting and interdicting a variety of smuggling conveyances including commercial fishing vessels, ocean-going cargo freighters, and pleasure craft. Beginning in the late 1990s through today, cocaine has been the predominant drug trafficked via maritime routes. During this time, drug traffickers have continued to find innovative yet increasingly risky ways to subvert Coast Guard counter-narcotics tactics. Cocaine cartels initially used some of the very same conveyances used by marijuana smugglers; they transported multi-ton loads of cocaine on slow vessels with high cargo capacity that were vulnerable to interdiction. These cartels quickly adapted to Coast Guard interdiction efforts and expanded tactics to include the ubiquitous "go-fast vessel," as well as more modern conveyances, including the purpose-built Self-Propelled Semi-Submersible (SPSS) and "low profile vessel" (LPV) to disperse loads onto conveyances that are even more difficult to detect.

According to multiple U.S. Government reports, Colombia is the number one coca producing country in the world. Following the end of Colombian aerial eradication efforts in 2015, cocaine production increased significantly leading to three straight years of 200+ metric ton maritime cocaine removals, the highest three years in Coast Guard history. Catching this toxic drug in bulk in the maritime environment proves much more efficient and effective than attempting to detect and seize that same cocaine when it is broken up into smaller loads coming across the land border or being sold on our city streets. To meet this growing threat and prevent these drugs from reaching the United States, the Coast Guard has dedicated additional attention and assets to the Transit Zone, invested in the people and platforms necessary to carry out an aggressive interdiction effort, and helped to build regional partner capabilities.

Current Threat: Transnational Criminal Organizations, Violence, and Instability

One of the goals of the Coast Guard's drug interdiction program is to interdict illicit traffic as close to the source as possible. This helps to stem the flow of drugs reaching Central America, Mexico, and the United States. Over the past five years, Coast Guard cutters and aircraft have removed more than 871 metric tons of high-purity cocaine from at sea, with a wholesale value of approximately \$26 billion¹. That equates to tremendous social and economic impacts, potentially preventing as many as 5,200 to 9,500 cocaine-related overdose deaths, 480,000 to 9.9 million new U.S. cocaine users, and the introduction of up to 67,000 U.S. drug-related offenders to the penal system, saving up to \$2 billion in costs of inmate care, and potentially preventing as many as 33,000 violent murders in Mexico and Central America. Despite these successes, TCO networks operate throughout Central America, vying for power through drug-fueled violence and corruption of government officials; in fact, eight of the ten countries with the highest per capita rates of homicide are along the cocaine trafficking routes in the Western Hemisphere².

In response, the Coast Guard's Western Hemisphere Strategy identifies three priorities for the maritime domain in the Western Hemisphere: combating networks, securing borders, and safeguarding commerce.

Combating TCOs - A Layered Approach to Drug Interdiction

The Coast Guard uses a "maritime trident" of cutters, boats, and aircraft in a layered approach to combatting TCOs as they transport illicit goods from the source zone, through Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and into the United States. This approach confronts the threat beyond our land borders, on the high seas where traffickers are most exposed and drugs are most vulnerable to interdiction. This layered approach begins overseas, spans the offshore regions, and continues into our territorial seas and our ports of entry.

¹ US Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, *2013 United States Illicit Drug Prices*, DEA Intelligence Report, DEA-DCW-DIR-012-15, January 2015.

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*.

In the offshore transit zone, the Coast Guard is the major maritime interdiction asset provider to U.S. Southern Command through JIATF-South, which executes U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) statutory responsibility for the detection and monitoring of illicit drug trafficking in the air and maritime domains bound for the United States. The fixed-wing maritime patrol aircraft, provided by the Coast Guard, CBP, DoD, and partner nations, coupled with sophisticated intelligence cueing capabilities provided through JIATF-South, enables Coast Guard interdiction efforts. The most capable Coast Guard interdiction platforms include flight deck-equipped major cutters, embarked armed helicopters, deployable pursuit-capable boats, and Coast Guard law enforcement detachments embarked on U.S. Navy and allied ships.

In Fiscal Year 2018, the Coast Guard provided 17 percent of total maritime patrol aircraft, 74 percent of ships, 94 percent of armed helicopters, and all law enforcement detachment support to JIATF-South. Coast Guard collected interdiction data is then fed back to the apprehension effort to cue additional interdiction success. In Fiscal Year 2018, assets coupled with both intelligence targeting and dedicated maritime patrol aircraft support had nearly double the interdiction rate as opposed to those patrolling ships that had only one or neither of these supporting elements.

New assets are proving increasingly effective in this fight. During a 2018 deployment, the National Security Cutter (NSC) STRATTON, in support of JIATF-South, removed nearly nine metric tons of cocaine and apprehended 23 suspected smugglers as a direct result of their embarked small unmanned aircraft system (sUAS). The sUAS capability is a force multiplier—it expands the NSC’s detection radius, can provide persistent presence awaiting the Coast Guard’s arrival on scene, and provides situational awareness to boarding and helicopter teams. This fiscal year we will continue to deploy sUAS on NSCs, further increasing the effectiveness of our most-capable offshore patrol assets. This ability to organically target, detect, and interdict drug smuggling vessels is critical in an operating area greater than the size of the continental U.S. Since Fiscal Year 2017, interdictions from five NSCs alone have netted over 300 suspects to U.S. prosecution and removed over 123 metric tons of cocaine with a street value of \$3.7 billion³, accounting for nearly 25 percent of all cocaine removals that year.

One of our newest assets, the near-coastal Fast Response Cutter (FRC), is also a critical tool in our border security and interdiction posture. In 2017, the Coast Guard Cutter JOSEPH NAPIER, newly homeported in Puerto Rico, interdicted 4.2 metric tons of cocaine, the largest interdiction of any FRC.

Our interdiction capabilities continue to prove their value against TCO’s conveyance of choice: the go-fast vessel. In Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018, our Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) of armed helicopters – along with partner aircraft from the U.S. Navy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, operating under the Coast Guard’s law enforcement authority – set a record of 126 at-sea interdictions, with over 115 metric tons of cocaine removed; more than any other two-year total in Coast Guard history.

³ US Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, *2013 United States Illicit Drug Prices*, DEA Intelligence Report, DEA-DCW-DIR-012-15, January 2015.

In addition, the Coast Guard began providing high-speed pursuit boats and crews to U.S. Navy Patrol Coastal class ships operating in the transit zone in 2016 to increase interdiction opportunities. Coupled with Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments and other deployable specialized forces personnel, this innovative force package capability has netted 21 interdictions and removed over 14 metric tons of cocaine since its inception.

The importance of 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 by denying them financial resources. The Coast Guard has recently refined its interdiction analytics to examine several measures of success to include the seizure rate of valuable non-drug evidence.

In Fiscal Year 2018, 70 percent of U.S. Coast Guard drug interdictions resulted in the collection of non-drug evidence that provide links between individual smugglers and related TCO activity. These critical elements contribute to actionable intelligence for future events, producing follow-on investigative leads, seizures, and arrests.

In total for Fiscal Year 2018, the Coast Guard removed 209 metric tons of cocaine and 25,200 pounds of marijuana from the transit zone, worth an estimated wholesale value of \$6.2 billion, with 602 suspected smugglers apprehended. This marked the third consecutive year the Service exceeded 200 metric tons of cocaine removed. Despite the tremendous quantity of cocaine removed in Fiscal Year 2018, the Coast Guard estimates that it, along with our entire domestic and international partners, were able to remove only 9.4 percent of the suspected non-commercial maritime cocaine flow in the transit zone. Interagency analysis shows a continued elevated flow of cocaine in the transit zone, and the subsequent maritime smuggling threat is projected through at least 2020. Increased flow, coupled with evolving conveyances and concealment tactics, this will continue to stress our ability to respond adequately to this threat.

While more than 90 percent of our 2018 interdictions were cued by intelligence, the limited availability of Coast Guard's aging major cutters and the number of limited assets available to detect all the cued drug events, ultimately restricted our ability to interdict more targets. Critical acquisitions like the Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) are essential to the long-term success in 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 desperately in need of replacement. Additionally, whole-of-government commitment of additional detection capability, particularly long-range patrol aircraft, remains critical to increasing the number of identified targets that can be interdicted.

International Cooperation

In coordination with JIATF-South, the Coast Guard is engaged with partner nations, including key partners Colombia, responsible for 60 percent of critical movement alerts to JIATF-South, and Mexico, as well as countries throughout Central and South America, leveraging their capabilities and local knowledge to improve maritime governance in the littoral regions being exploited by TCOs. Among the efforts to foster international cooperation and build partner capacity, Coast Guard personnel are posted as attachés, liaisons, and drug interdiction specialists at several embassies in the Western Hemisphere. These personnel develop strategic relationships with partner nations that facilitate the coordination of real-time operations. The Coast Guard's law enforcement, legal, and regulatory expertise are in high demand from Central American partners, whose navies more closely resemble the U.S. Coast Guard, focusing primarily on maritime law enforcement rather than force projection. Coast Guard International Training Teams, as well as cutters deployed in the region, increase professional interaction, training in conjunction with operations, and maritime exercises.

Highlighting international cooperation and success, over the past year, the Coast Guard leveraged the U.S./Costa Rica Bilateral Agreement through a joint shiprider operation with Costa Rica from December 2018 through April 2019. Costa Rican Maritime Interdiction Units, supported by U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement personnel, enhanced their country's ability to conduct interdiction operations from the newly acquired Libertadors (former US Coast Guard 110-foot patrol boats), resulting in the removal of over four metric tons of cocaine. More importantly, the training provided by U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement personnel, coupled with a bolstered surface fleet, enabled Costa Rica to emerge as a powerful force multiplier in the Transit Zone.

Increased cooperation with Panama and Costa Rica over the last few years have garnered substantial results in each country's role in the multi-national fight against TCOs. Over the past two years, Panama and Costa Rica have ranked one and two, respectively, in partner nation support to JIATF-South interdictions and cocaine removals, netting a total of more than 65 metric tons of cocaine spanning 83 interdictions. Furthermore, the Coast Guard has supported the strengthening of each country's systems to advance legal consequences, providing boarding officer testimony in six in-country trials, collectively enforcing rule of law in the Western Hemisphere.

Working in conjunction with the U.S. Departments of State and Justice, the Coast Guard negotiated, concluded, and maintains over 40 counterdrug bilateral agreements and operational procedures with partner nations throughout the world, the majority of which are in the Western Hemisphere. These agreements enable the Coast Guard to board suspect vessels, facilitate interdictions in under-patrolled territorial waters of partner nations, and coordinate interdiction and apprehension operations in the transit zone. Highlighting their importance to Coast Guard counterdrug efforts, 66 percent of all Coast Guard interdictions in fiscal year 2018 involved the use of a bilateral agreement or operational procedures agreement.

The Arrival Zone

Closer to the shores of the United States, Coast Guard operational commanders work with the other operational components within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and across the Federal Government to provide a robust presence in the U.S. maritime approaches by deploying FRCs, high speed pursuit boats and aircraft. To achieve unity of effort, the Coast Guard is a major contributor to DHS' Southern Border and Approaches Campaign. The Coast Guard Atlantic Area Commander serves as the Director of Joint Task Force East, overseeing coordination efforts for DHS components operating in the maritime approaches in the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico, and eastern Pacific Ocean. This component of DHS is instrumental in the aggressive posture aimed at securing our maritime borders surrounding Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including the approaches from South America, Hispaniola, and the Leeward Islands. Surge operations such as FULL COURT PRESS continue to leverage DHS targeting, detection, and interdiction capabilities, resulting in the removal of 44 metric tons of cocaine and apprehension of 156 suspected smugglers over the past two years.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard endeavors to secure our vast maritime border by identifying emergent threats and combatting them in a layered approach, utilizing strong international relationships and maximizing domestic and regional partnerships. The Coast Guard stands ready to meet offshore and coastal drug trafficking threats in the maritime domain posed by TCOs operating throughout the transit zone.

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.