

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Finding Nemo's Future: Conflicts over Ocean Resources

June 12, 2025

Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks

Witnesses:

Mr. Gregory Poling, Director and Senior Fellow, Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic & International Studies

Mr. Nathan Rickard, Partner, Picard Kentz & Rowe

Mr. Gabriel Prout, President, Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers

Dr. Whitley Saumweber, Director, Stephenson Ocean Security Project, CSIS

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to my colleague for also your great work on the Subcommittee. And thank you, Senator Sullivan, just for the important discussion about illegally, unreported, unregulated fisheries and how much that causes harm in both Washington and Alaska and across the nation. I'm sure that's pretty much been the subject of this conversation.

Sen. Sullivan: The world. Alaska, Delaware, Texas, the world.

Sen. Cantwell: So illegal fishing counts for up to 1/3 the world's total fishery [harvest]. So about 11% [of the], 22 billion, in [2019 U.S.] seafood imports were caught illegally. So, this really does- China and Russia are two of the worst actors in this space. And Russia, in particular, poses a direct threat to the livelihood of US fishermen, including in my home state.

One study found that 1/3 of fish imported from China was actually Russian fish, and we need to keep up the pressure to stop this illegal Russian seafood from disrupting the markets here in the United States.

So, in the 2022 Defense bill, working with my colleague from Alaska, we included the largest ocean legislative package in decades, including provisions to expand NOAA seafood traceability programs, and we work together with the NOAA Corps to expand their fleet of vessels and aircraft so that we can more and better affect stock assessments and better science, and support for fishing families to stop the illegal fishing.

So, the administration, though, is calling for us to be seafood dominant. That's great. They say they care about stopping illegal fishing and yet they are gutting the core of NOAA programs and staffing. And that could have disastrous effects to our fisheries management science and enforcement.

So far, the administration's action have led to 576 employees at the National Marine Fisheries Service being lost. That's an 18% reduction staff from January, and a 36% vacancy rate of normal staffing levels. NOAA told fishery managers not to expect basic survey data that they need to manage fisheries. This is unacceptable.

To make it worse, 30% of NOAA's research ships will be tied up at the docks this summer because administration refusing... [mic cuts out, no audio available]

Sen. Cantwell First Q&A

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: My question to you, Mr. Saumweber, is [that] science is the foundation [of fisheries management and] how are these current NOAA budget cuts...impacting on [NOAA] not being able to do stock assessments? [And] hurting us in our ability to combat illegal fishing?

Mr. Saumweber: Thank you, Senator. So, budget cuts to NOAA are devastating to our ability to combat IE IUU, fishing. You can't really combat the problem without understanding what's there. The challenge, as you noted, is to have a strong foundation, strong understanding of what is sustainable, of what is possible to catch.

And without that understanding, we have a very limited ability to work, to set appropriate boundaries, to work with our partners, to combat IUU fishing. NOAA science is the foundation for all of these negotiations that we're doing in the international space with our partners, and it is the foundation for the work that we do here at home to prevent illegal products from coming into the nation.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you for that.

Sen. Cantwell Second Q&A

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. Prout, as a crabber, are you concerned about the NOAA Fisheries workforce programs and the cuts and impacts?

Mr. Prout: Yes, thank you, Ranking member, Senator Cantwell. Yeah, absolutely. The NOAA surveys are an essential part of how we run our fisheries. They're essentially the backbone of our fisheries across the US. So, without them, we don't have the data set for safe and sustainable harvest levels to be set.

These surveys guide our quotas, protect the resource, they give regulators the essential data and confidence to know whether or not they should open, or in some cases, close a fishery. So, if those surveys are underfunded or not funded all or delayed and they're operating, it causes a tremendous amount of uncertainty for the processors involved, for the fishermen involved, for the communities that rely on those on those species.

Continued investments and funding of those of surveys is not just good science, in my opinion, it's also required for economic stability so you still have these, these fisheries and a sustainable manner for the future.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I don't, again, I apologize to my colleagues and others if I'm repeating something that's been said. But we worked in a bipartisan basin to secure Coast Guard funding and infrastructure investment. We made massive upgrades to the Coast Guard infrastructure in Kodiak, your hometown, I guess. And we authorized new heavy weather boats needed for search and rescue for the fishermen off our coast.

And I'm concerned that the Coast Guard has temporary reassigned ships and aircraft away from those core missions without a concrete plan. So, for example, a C130, based in Kodiak, is now being used to fly, 'alien expulsion missions,' on behalf of ICE.

Sen. Cantwell Third Q&A

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: We need them to do the search and rescue and to deter illegal fishing in the Bering Sea. So, you highlighted in your written statement that we should fund Coast Guard to increase to combat illegal fishing. How important is this presence in Kodiak for crabbers?

Mr. Prout: Thank you, Ranking Member, Cantwell. It's tremendously important. When you start losing necessary infrastructure and pieces of equipment that are dedicated for those search and rescue efforts, the IUU efforts - to deter IUU - and they start being allocated to different areas, and then, when they originally intended, it makes it extremely difficult for fishermen to make safe and sound decisions when you know there's going to be less assets available for one of the most primary functions, which is search and rescue and protection of the fleet.

So, it's very critical that we maintain those pieces of infrastructure for the local fishing communities throughout Alaska and the US.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. Mr. Chair, if I could just Mr. Saumweber for the record. I talked about surveys, but I think you probably believe the fishing patrols are also important. The fishing patrols are also important...

Mr. Saumweber: Yes, of course.

Sen. Cantwell: ... to the management council.

Mr. Saumweber: Absolutely yes.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.