



TESTIMONY OF

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ON

“Interdicting Illicit Drug Trafficking: A View from the Front Lines”

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Introduction

Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify and for your continued support of the United States Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security generally. I look forward to discussing the Coast Guard's maritime drug interdiction operations. We have a proud history of protecting and defending our Nation by ensuring our economic prosperity and national security in the maritime domain since the founding of the Revenue Marine in 1790. Today, our efforts remain focused on guarding our Nation against maritime border threats and conducting all of the Coast Guard's 11 statutory missions.

As our Acting Commandant highlighted in recent Service-wide guidance, controlling our maritime borders and approaches, including conducting maritime drug interdiction, is a priority for the Trump Administration and a critical function of the Coast Guard. We are particularly qualified to answer the call to safeguard the homeland. In Fiscal Year 2024, the Coast Guard removed over 106 metric tons of cocaine, bringing our six-year total to 873.5 metric tons removed. While a substantial amount, it would be much higher if we had more available interdiction and detection assets – Coast Guard cutters and aircraft, and Navy ships – to conduct these critical operations.

The multitude of Coast Guard missions necessarily create competing demands for these limited assets, specifically on interdicting drugs in the maritime transit zone. Assets that could otherwise be targeting drug traffickers are also needed to maintain elevated cutter presence in support of Homeland Security Task Force Southeast to counter illegal maritime migration, provide support to Administration priorities in the Indo-Pacific, assure presence in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska to deter Russia and People's Republic of China, and advance the global effort to counter illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The Coast Guard continuously assesses demands and strategically employs assets to maximize effectiveness and mitigate risk to the Nation – we do a lot, but we strive to do much more. The trafficking of illegal drugs poses an exigent threat to the American people, and the men and women of the Coast Guard continue to do everything in their power to remove cocaine and other contraband before they reach our shores and our citizens.

Of equal importance as cocaine removals in 2024 are the 288 drug smugglers detained for U.S. or foreign prosecution as a result of Coast Guard interdictions. Those individuals and associated evidence provided critical information to advance Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Justice (DOJ) investigations into smuggling networks that present a larger threat to U.S. border security. The same transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) engaging in cocaine smuggling are also responsible for trafficking people and other drugs, including fentanyl and its precursors, into the U.S. while creating instability in the source and transit zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, at the Southern Border, and throughout our hemisphere. Coast Guard interdictions of bulk quantity cocaine decrease TCO profit margins, while also providing valuable information to aid our investigative partners. The Coast Guard is postured to disrupt illegal trafficking in the maritime environment to advance the broader United States goals to secure the Nation's borders and help dismantle TCOs.

Drug Trafficking – Overview

Mexico-based TCOs transship much of the cocaine consumed in the U.S. through Central America and the Caribbean using licit commercial shipping companies and illicit drug trafficking shipping networks. The Coast Guard's cutter fleet and versatile Tactical Law Enforcement Teams (TACLETs) operating from U.S. Navy and allied warships target bulk cocaine movements typically originating from Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, pushing the U.S. borders out hundreds of miles from land. Two major drug transit corridors exist in the Western Hemisphere: the Eastern Pacific and the Caribbean. In the Eastern Pacific, there are multiple vectors used to move bulk cocaine; however, traffickers generally land contraband between Costa Rica and Mexico for further shipment to the U.S. In the western Caribbean Sea, bulk cocaine is typically trafficked through Honduras or Nicaragua through Mexico and moved across the Southwest Border into the U.S. In the central and eastern Caribbean, the bulk smuggling destinations are typically the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. Approximately 60 to 65 percent of the cocaine destined for the U.S. flows through the Eastern Pacific corridor, while 35 to 40 percent moves through the Caribbean Sea.

National Drug Control Strategy & the Coast Guard's Role

Since 1989, the National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS) has emphasized the global reach of U.S. enforcement and interdiction efforts to address both illicit drug supply and demand. The Trump Administration's deliberate focus on combatting TCOs and securing our borders reinforces the value of the Coast Guard's capabilities. Historically, drug interdiction missions sought to reduce supply, and were supported by our cutters, boarding teams, and aircraft. However, our role has advanced beyond mere presence and operations on and over the water. As a member of the Intelligence Community, the Coast Guard works across the government to collect, analyze and share critical information to target TCOs and drug trafficking terrorists.

The Commandant of the Coast Guard serves as the Chair of The Interdiction Committee (TIC), which is the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) senior interagency forum attended by drug interdiction officials from 26 departments and agencies. Last year, TIC principals convened in San Juan, Puerto Rico to review issues related to the coordination, oversight, and integration of international, border, and domestic drug interdiction efforts. It highlighted the unique counter-drug challenges from Panama north into the U.S. waters and territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, which are on the front lines of our southeast U.S. border, and the broader drug interdiction concerns we face as Nation.

In addition to our role within TIC, Coast Guard Flag Officers lead the U.S. Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) and Indo-Pacific Command's Joint Interagency Task Force West (JIATF-W). These task forces are charged with executing the Department of Defense's (DoD) Title 10 responsibility for the detection and monitoring of illicit aerial and maritime drug trafficking, while efficiently coordinating interdiction operations conducted by Coast Guard, the interagency, allies, and partner nations.

Drug Interdiction Operations

The Coast Guard works closely with JIATF-S and JIATF-W to target illicit narcotics and fentanyl precursor flows. While we strive for U.S. interdictions to support investigations by our DHS and DOJ partners, we look to coordinate a partner nation response when a U.S. interdiction is not possible. In Fiscal Year 2024, partner nations contributed to approximately 80 percent of documented JIATF-S cocaine disruptions, while the Coast Guard provided actionable intelligence to European law enforcement partners on trans-Atlantic cocaine movement, accounting for an additional 76.6 metric tons disrupted. This was the largest percentage of partner nation contributions on record; a promising trend indicating the increased capability and willingness of our partners to collaborate on this important mission. In a recent six-week period from December 20, 2024, to January 31, 2025, the Coast Guard positioned multiple assets in the Eastern Pacific to successfully conduct 32 interdictions, seize over 43 metric tons of cocaine and detain 85 smugglers for transfer to Department of Justice Organized Crime Task Forces for prosecution and further investigation. On February 13, 2025, in California, a Coast Guard cutter off-loaded over 16.9 metric tons of cocaine with an estimated street value of over \$275.7 million that will never be sold to poison the American people.

While a multitude of Coast Guard assets engage in counterdrug operations, our National Security Cutters have proven to be our most effective platform for this mission, especially when combined with a force package consisting of an embarked helicopter and a small-unmanned aircraft. Just last month, Coast Guard Cutter (CGC) *James* responded to three suspected smuggling vessels in their operating area. The cutter simultaneously launched three small boats and their airborne use-of-force capable helicopter, successfully stopping all three suspect vessels. With these suspected smuggling vessels being subject to U.S. jurisdiction under the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act, the cutter's crew conducted lawful boardings and seized over six metric tons of cocaine and detained nine Ecuadorian smugglers. This successful operation was part of an even more impressive week, with CGC *James* interdicting a total of six cocaine-laden smuggling vessels.

Fentanyl

Fentanyl is a major U.S. counterdrug priority and has been the leading cause of U.S. drug-related deaths since 2016, accounting for approximately 70 percent of U.S. drug overdose deaths in 2023. Mexican TCOs are the primary source of synthetic opioid flow into the U.S., predominantly across our Southwest Border. While bulk fentanyl has yet to be encountered in the maritime domain, the Coast Guard is leveraging all of our authorities, capabilities, and policies to seek out and interdict both fentanyl and 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.

Coast Guard drug interdictions, while historically focused on cocaine and marijuana, are critical to the whole-of-government effort to combat TCOs. Cocaine interdictions at sea cut off a critical source of funding for the same Mexican TCOs that produce and smuggle fentanyl, impairing their efforts to produce and smuggle fentanyl into the United States. Beyond our efforts on the water and in the ports, Coast Guard intelligence personnel work closely with our Intelligence Community partners to combat TCOs that threaten the U.S. by providing valuable and actionable information targeting suspected smuggling terrorists.

Partnerships

As the United States' lead maritime law enforcement agency, the Coast Guard has a broad range of authorities and a network of interagency and international partnerships that enable us to conduct law enforcement operations on the high seas to combat threats far from U.S. borders. The Coast Guard conducts drug interdiction operations over a six-million square mile transit zone, and the Service depends on robust partnerships for mission success. Drug interdiction is a large-scale operation, and a Service of our size relies on like-minded partners to drive our whole-of-government effort to target TCOs that threaten our Nation.

The Coast Guard relies on over 40 counterdrug bilateral and multilateral international agreements and arrangements with stakeholder nations to enable seamless, coordinated law enforcement efforts against TCOs. These agreements and arrangements are critical to Coast Guard drug interdiction successes, as they allow our law enforcement teams to conduct boardings of foreign-flagged vessels and promote time-critical partner nation coordination during high-seas drug interdiction operations. The Coast Guard works closely with the Department of State (DOS) to improve the effectiveness of partner nations' counterdrug efforts by negotiating, securing, and managing those agreements.

In addition to exercising international agreements and arrangements, the Coast Guard relies on allies and international partners to provide assets, collaborate on operations, and share intelligence to eradicate maritime trafficking. We coordinate operations with, and regularly deploy Coast Guard law enforcement teams aboard allied vessels (e.g., United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Canada), and work closely with partner nations throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean to dismantle regional maritime trafficking networks.

Force packages consisting of allied partner assets, augmented with small Coast Guard TACLETs provide tremendously high operational return on investment. In late January 2025, we deployed a team of 10 Coast Guard law enforcement personnel aboard a Royal Netherlands Navy ship, and, within 48 hours of operational certification, they interdicted a boat 30 miles off the coast of Venezuela, seizing nearly three metric tons of cocaine and detaining five Venezuelan and Colombian suspected traffickers.

The DoD-Coast Guard partnership is also critical to the Nation's drug interdiction mission and our collective ability to succeed. While DoD is the lead federal agency for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transits of illegal drugs into the United States, the Coast Guard leverages unique law enforcement authorities to serve as the lead agency for the interdiction and apprehension of vessels suspected of engaging in maritime drug trafficking. The Coast Guard's role as a law enforcement agency, an armed force, and a member of the Intelligence Community allows us to leverage our vital suite of authorities and capabilities in various ways throughout the interdiction process, unique among cooperating agencies.

Similarly, the Coast Guard maintains close connections with DOJ to prosecute cases and investigate TCO networks. In addition to engagement on various DOJ-led interagency task forces, the Coast Guard assigns judge advocates who serve as Special Assistant United States Attorneys to work side-by-side with DOJ attorneys in the U.S. Attorney's Offices who prosecute the majority of significant maritime drug cases. This model is highly successful and allows the Coast Guard to bring its maritime counterdrug expertise into the courtroom.

Within DHS, a Coast Guard flag officer leads Joint Task Force East (JTF-EAST), which is responsible for coordinating activities and operations across DHS components (i.e., Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) to protect the U.S. Southeast Border and maritime approaches. In 2024, Caribbean coalition efforts across synchronized, enduring operations resulted in the interdiction of 538 illegal Aliens, 71.4 metric tons of cocaine, 339 illegal firearms, and over 26,000 rounds of ammunition. Working with JIATF-S, allies, and international partners, we have improved unified efforts to disrupt TCOs in the Caribbean.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard continues to provide tremendous value to the United States through our maritime drug interdiction operations. We strive to control the maritime border in direct support of President's Trump's recent Executive Orders and direction from Homeland Security Secretary Noem. We will continue to address surface fleet challenges and competing mission demands to ensure the Coast Guard remains well-positioned to assist in dismantling TCOs, interdicting illegal narcotics, and prosecuting those responsible. The continued success of Coast Guard counterdrug operations hinges on continued investment in the Service - recruiting motivated people, providing them with the proper tools, and empowering them to serve the Nation. Congress' continued support will help the world's best Coast Guard meet these global demands.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your continued support of the Coast Guard. I would be pleased to answer your questions.