



**TESTIMONY OF
ADMIRAL KEVIN E. LUNDAY
VICE COMMANDANT, U. S. COAST GUARD**

**ON
COAST GUARD DRUG INTERDICTION
AND ENFORCEMENT IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, FISHERIES,
CLIMATE CHANGE, AND MANUFACTURING**

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Introduction

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify. Thank you for your continued support of the United States Coast Guard. 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 and our efforts remain focused on guarding our Nation against maritime border threats and conducting all of the Coast Guard's 11 statutory missions.

Drug interdiction is a priority Coast Guard mission and one for which the Service is uniquely qualified. In Fiscal Year 2023, the Coast Guard removed over 96 metric tons of cocaine, bringing our six-year total to 977 metric tons removed. While this is a substantial amount, it falls short of our annual goals for several reasons, including fewer available surface interdiction assets – Coast Guard cutters and Navy ships – and increased demands from the Coast Guard's other missions. Those competing demands include elevating cutter presence in support of Homeland Security Task Force Southeast to counter historic levels of irregular maritime migration, increasing support to national priorities in the Indo-Pacific, providing critical Coast Guard assets in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska to meet Russia and People's Republic of China presence, and advancing the global effort to counter illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The Coast Guard continuously assesses those demands and strategically employs our assets to maximize effectiveness and mitigate risk to the Nation. The trafficking of illegal narcotics poses a real threat to the American people, and I am proud of the work the Coast Guard does to remove cocaine and other narcotics before they reach our shores.

As important as the amount of cocaine removed are the 267 drug trafficking smugglers detained for U.S. or foreign prosecution in 2023, as these individuals and associated evidence provide critical information for Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) investigations into the 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, as well as creating instability in source and transit zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, at the Southwest Border, and throughout the region. Not only do Coast Guard interdictions of incoming cocaine loads impact profit margins, those interdictions provide valuable information on the broader smuggling networks for our U.S investigative partners to leverage. We know the TCOs are most vulnerable when trafficking at sea, where the Coast Guard is most effective at disrupting illegal activities.

Drug Trafficking – Overview

Mexican TCOs traffic most of the cocaine consumed in the U.S., sourcing it from Colombia, often via transshipment through Central America and the Caribbean. The Coast Guard’s cutter fleet and versatile tactical law enforcement teams, operating from U.S. Navy and allied warships, target bulk cocaine movements typically originating from Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. 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, but traffickers generally land contraband between Costa Rica and Mexico for further shipment to the U.S. southwest land border. In the western Caribbean Sea, bulk cocaine is typically shipped via Honduras or Nicaragua and on to Mexico for shipment across the U.S. Southwest Border. In the central and eastern Caribbean, the bulk smuggling destination is typically the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. Approximately 60 to 65 percent of the cocaine destined for the United States flows through the Eastern Pacific corridor while 35 to 40 percent is shipped through the Caribbean Sea.

National Drug Control Strategy & the Coast Guard’s Role

The National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS) emphasizes the global reach of U.S. enforcement and interdiction efforts and addresses both illicit drug supply and demand. The Coast Guard’s work falls squarely into supply reduction, which we support with our cutters, boarding teams, and aircraft, as well as with information and intelligence sharing to our task forces that target TCOs. However, our role is much bigger than our presence on and over the water.

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. Just three months ago, our Commandant, Admiral Fagan, convened the TIC principals in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to work on issues related to the coordination, oversight, and integration of international, border, and domestic drug interdiction efforts in support of the President’s NDCS. It highlighted the unique counter-drug challenges in the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, which are part of our southeast U.S. border, as well as broader drug interdiction concerns for the Nation as a whole.

In addition to our role with the TIC, Coast Guard flag Officers direct both U.S. Southern Command’s Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) and Indo-Pacific Command’s Joint Interagency Task Force West (JIATF-W), leading the primary organizations 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 with the Coast Guard, interagency, allies, and partner nations for interdiction and related activities.

Partnerships

As the Nation's 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, pushing threats far from U.S. borders. The Coast Guard conducts drug interdiction operations over a six-million square mile transit zone which includes the Caribbean Sea and the Eastern Pacific Ocean. However, we cannot cover that massive threat area alone. The Coast Guard relies on robust partnerships to conduct the drug interdiction mission and drive our whole-of-government effort to target TCOs that threaten our Nation.

The Coast Guard relies on over 40 bilateral and multilateral international agreements with allies and partner nations that enable seamless, coordinated law enforcement efforts against TCOs. These international agreements are critical to Coast Guard drug interdiction successes, allowing the Coast Guard to conduct ship boardings of foreign-flagged vessels and time-critical operational coordination with partner nations during high-seas drug interdiction operations. The Department of State (DOS) plays a crucial role in negotiating, securing, and managing those agreements, and works closely with the Coast Guard on capacity-building efforts to improve the effectiveness of partner nations' counter-drug efforts.

In addition to exercising international agreements, the Coast Guard relies on allies and international partners to provide assets, collaborate on operations, share intelligence, and work 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, Canada, and France), and work closely with partner nations throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean to dismantle maritime trafficking networks in the region.

The Department of Defense (DoD)-Coast Guard partnership is 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 (under Title 10, U.S. Code), the Coast Guard leverages unique authorities (under Title 14, U.S. Code) to serve as the lead agency for the interdiction and apprehension of vessels suspected of engaging in maritime drug trafficking. The Coast Guard's unique role as both a law enforcement agency and an armed force allows us to bridge these communities and leverage the full suite of authorities across the government.

Similarly, the Coast Guard maintains close connections with the DOJ to prosecute cases and investigate TCO networks. Those relationships are key to ensuring a prosecution endgame for Coast Guard-initiated cases offshore. 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 that prosecute the majority of the maritime drug cases. This model is highly successful and allows the Coast Guard to bring its maritime counter-drug expertise into the courtroom.

Within DHS, the Coast Guard leads the DHS Joint Task Force East (JTF-EAST) which is responsible for coordinating activities and operations across DHS components with others to protect the U.S. Southeast Border and maritime approaches. For the past two years, JTF-EAST has focused on addressing the threat of drug smuggling in the eastern Caribbean that is undermining security and stability in a region vital to U.S. border security. Working with JIATF-S, allies, and international partners, we have improved unified efforts to disrupt TCOs in the eastern Caribbean.

Drug Interdiction Operations

The Coast Guard works closely with JIATF-S and JIATF-W to target Western Hemisphere and Indo-Pacific illicit narcotics (and precursors) flow, respectively. When interdiction assets are available, we prioritize U.S. interdictions to support investigations by our DOJ and DHS partners. When a U.S. interdiction is not possible, coordinating partner nation response is the preferred option. In Fiscal Year 2023, partner nations contributed approximately 80 percent of documented cocaine disruptions. This was the largest percentage of partner nation contributions on record, a promising trend that highlights the increasing capability and willingness of our partners to help shoulder the load of this important mission. In Fiscal Year 2023, the Coast Guard also provided intelligence support to European law enforcement partners on trans-Atlantic cocaine movement, accounting for an additional 45 metric tons disrupted.

Fentanyl

While fentanyl is a top 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, it has not yet been encountered in significant quantities in the maritime domain. Mexican TCOs are the primary source of synthetic opioids flow into the U.S., predominantly across our Southwest Border. Presently there is no significant Coast Guard nexus to U.S.-bound fentanyl shipments, nor to precursor chemicals destined for Mexico. In the previous five fiscal years (2019-2023), the Coast Guard conducted over 1,030 drug interdiction events but only three of those events involved fentanyl, totaling 26.8 kilograms removed. However, interdiction of cocaine shipments directly targets and impacts the same Mexican TCOs that produce and smuggle fentanyl. Moreover, cocaine remains a threat to the United States public: cocaine-involved overdose deaths increased in 2023 by over 5.6 percent, to over 30,000 deaths. Overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone (e.g., fentanyl), meanwhile, decreased by about 1.7 percent. The Coast Guard is postured with appropriate authority, capability, and policy to interdict fentanyl smuggling in the maritime environment. Our intelligence personnel are connected and working with their Intelligence Community partners in this important mission.

Coast Guard Workforce

Sufficient numbers of modern cutters and aircraft are essential to Coast Guard maritime drug interdiction operations; however, it is Coast Guard men and women who are the most critical to our success. Our people performing drug interdiction operate in a dangerous and unforgiving maritime environment, encountering smugglers who would do them harm. That is why the Commandant has prioritized investments in recruiting, readiness, and retention of our talented workforce to ensure our Service remains *Semper Paratus*—Always Ready, both today and into the future.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard continues to provide tremendous value to the United States in the maritime drug interdiction mission. Despite surface fleet reductions and competing mission demands, the Coast Guard remains well positioned to contribute to illicit drug supply reduction efforts as well as our Nation's overall drug control strategy. Future success of Coast Guard counterdrug operations hinge on continued investment in recruiting efforts, and the recapitalization of our aging fleet – Congress' continued generous support will help the Nation's greatest 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.