

Ranking Member Maria Cantwell Q&A
“The Blue Economy: Advancing American Fisheries, Maritime Strength, and Coastal Economies”
Subcommittee on Coast Guard, Maritime, & Fisheries
June 2, 2026
[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to you and to Senator Blunt Rochester for holding this very important meeting on the Blue Economy and the competitiveness of America in the maritime sector. So very much appreciated. I don't think you were including me on people who helped claim credit for helping you on Russian fish. I think you thought I helped you, right?

Sen. Sullivan: No, I wasn't including you at all.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay.

Sen. Sullivan: You're a partner.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. Appreciate that. And I want to continue to be. I think this issue you've just illuminated — I just went on a trip to China with four of our colleagues, including two from our committee, and definitely brought up seafood. The Senator's point about Russia moving their illegal fish through China has got to stop. And China has to become a better sustainable fisheries nation, and we should work with them on that or point out how that should be accomplished. But they also represent 45% of the world's seafood consumption.

So I was very surprised to see a bountiful dinner that I had there of really just Northwest product — Dungeness crab, spot prawns, geoduck, shellfish. I was thinking they have the best — they're eating the best that Washington State has to offer. And so to me they should open up real quick..

Sen. Sullivan: Just real quick, do you think that was a propaganda dinner that they were like...

Sen. Cantwell: No, because it was arranged by somebody — by growers in our state. We had to push our way in. But the point is, instead of marketing and selling illegal Russian fish and trying to make money off of that, they should develop distribution and trade relations with the U.S. on seafood and better give us access to their market. Because they like seafood, and the fact that they consume so much — that's the big opportunity. And we're happy to [impart] to them what better fisheries management truly looks like, but we have lots of fish we can sell to them if they would just let it in the door. So I want to work with this committee and the two of you on ideas to further that.

But I do think that brings up a point about tariffs. I don't like the tariffs being charged on fisheries, and I don't know, maybe somebody might want to comment about that.

But this broader hearing being about strengthening the coastal communities in the maritime economy — I'll put a longer statement in for the record that covers all of that, Mr. Chairman. But I wanted to ask about the Jones Act, since we have a temporary waiver on the Jones Act, which

creates a little more uncertainty. I was very pleased that the MARAD Director and our Transportation Secretary all want to have a very aggressive shipbuilding agenda for the nation, and that they want us to be more active in the kind of capacity we have for investments in vessels, shipyards, workforce training, ports, and maritime infrastructure.

So I wanted to know specifically from you, Mr. Heil — if the waiver is extended again, what would that mean for investments in shipyards and workforce development? Does it create uncertainty? How should we communicate about this?

Mr. Heil: Senator, thank you for the question. The current waiver has created a tremendous amount of uncertainty— now 150 days — which is unprecedented. An unprecedented amount of time. To be extended again would be another signal to the investment community and to companies like ours and to mariners that the Jones Act is unstable, and investment will flee. Our U.S. mariners will wonder will they have jobs.

This budget request for FY27 includes a large investment in the Merchant Marine Academy, which is sorely needed. But without the Jones Act, we don't need a Merchant Marine Academy, frankly. It's hard to see why that investment would be moving forward. The Jones Act supports the jobs from the Merchant Marine Academy — those go into our commercial mariners, into the U.S. military. They're critical, and the Jones Act is the foundation for all of that. So when you talk about an extended waiver, it would be extremely damaging to every part of the U.S. maritime industry.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, we certainly don't want that. We certainly want a very strong Jones Act, and we certainly want a strong shipbuilding [industry]. Are there other specific investments that you think we should be looking at that would help workforce development and accelerate shipbuilding in the U.S.?

Witness: On the workforce side, there are a lot of very good ideas that we support in the SHIPS Act. On the mariner recruitment side, we need to do a better job there. For a lot of high school kids, they go to their high school counselor and hear about all the Service Academies, but don't hear about the Merchant Marine Academy. That needs to change. They need to know about our state academies, and it needs to be a nationwide effort, not just on the coast. Folks in the middle of the country need to understand that these are good jobs, good high-paying jobs, and they need to have access to that.

On the shipbuilding side, there's a lot we can do. I mentioned earlier in the hearing perhaps a tax incentive for companies that put cargo on U.S.-built ships — that would be one way to drive demand for U.S.-built vessels, because that cargo has to go on U.S.-built ships. There are also various ideas — more in the trade negotiation realm — but requiring a certain percentage of imports or exports from countries like China that they be put on U.S. flagged vessels. That would be a tremendous help in allowing U.S. companies and U.S. flagged vessels to compete in markets where we're excluded from right now.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I like that last idea, because this committee passed — in response to the COVID pandemic and the fact that international trade vessels were leaving U.S. products on the

dock. They were literally just coming here and dropping stuff off and running back, not even taking product back with them. And that led us to passing a reform to the Federal Maritime Commission and new tools to ensure that we were getting access and trade.

But this is an additional requirement, and I think the change, Mr. Chairman, in the landscape — both the COVID pandemic showed us, but now the interest in the Pacific writ large has shown us — that the United States needs to strengthen its capacity, and to do that, we have to strengthen our shipbuilding capacity.

I see both of my colleagues nodded when you talked about the workforce, because they know there are young people in our states that would love to know about six-figure welding jobs right out of high school. Somebody's nodding in the audience like, "Yeah, let us know — where are those?" And so we can be training and skilling at the high school level young people who want those six-figure jobs. We could be doing that right now.

Someone in my state, in Kitsap County — which is a very big maritime [area], we have military bases there and a huge navy population. They do train and skill for this, but we need, as you just said, it needs to be everywhere in the United States if we want to get the capacity for these young people.

But again, I thank the two of you for holding this hearing, and I'll take any comments for the record about the tariffs. But we...I don't know what the number is some big part—maybe 80% of our economy comes out of the coastal states. Well, it's a big number. So glad you're having this hearing, and glad we continue to focus on this. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

###