

Operation North Pacific Guard 2020

The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Douglas Munro recently completed a nearly two-month patrol, travelling 12,500 miles throughout the North Pacific Ocean, supporting Operation North Pacific Guard, an annual high seas U.S. fisheries international law enforcement operation designed to detect and deter illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The operation is a joint enforcement endeavor by North Pacific Rim nations, including Japan, China, Russia, South Korea, Canada, and the United States.



CGC Douglas Munro conducting a boarding of a Chinese fishing vessel.

IUU fishing undermines international agreements and fisheries conservation measures, jeopardizes global food security, and produces destabilizing effects on vulnerable coastal States. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations the majority of the world's major marine fish stocks are fully exploited, overexploited, or significantly depleted. As the world population continues to grow and world food demand increases, fishing pressure on high seas migratory fish stocks will continue to intensify.

Operation North Pacific Guard is conducted each year; originally focused on targeting illegal high seas driftnet fishing, a form of wild capture fisheries that poses a significant threat to living marine resources of the world's oceans. The practice involves the use of miles long gillnets that indiscriminately catch and kill everything in the water column, including slow-reproducing species like marine mammals, sharks, and seabirds which may require many years to recover. In response to this threat, in 1991 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution that placed a moratorium on high seas driftnet fishing. In recent years the operation has been expanded to counter all forms of IUU fishing in the North Pacific Ocean.

Participating nations contribute operationally by providing surface and air patrols, and sharing intelligence that facilitate at-sea inspections targeting IUU fishing activity. The United States Coast Guard leads the operation with one major surface asset with embarked MH-65 helicopter, and a C-130 aircraft.



Fishing Vessel Run Da, a High Seas Drift Net vessel, intercepted and escorted to Chinese authorities by Coast Guard Cutter Alex Haley in 2018 .

The Operation North Pacific Guard operation area is vast, encompassing more than three million square miles of high seas area. Locating fishing fleets and evaluating whether their operations are illicit or legitimate requires significant effort and coordination. Global Fishing Watch, a non-governmental organization committed to improving transparency in global fishing, provided valuable information related to suspect transshipment of fish products at sea, and vessel tracking systems that appeared to be “spoofed”, or intentionally manipulated to report false information. Investigation of these reports by the Fishing Agency of Japan and the Canadian Marine Security Operation Center (MSOC) was critical in the identification of numerous vessels of interest. MSOC also provided reconnaissance support, which further helped identify and target potential illicit activity. The Japan Coast Guard and Fisheries and Oceans Canada contributed aircraft resources that detected a potentially stateless vessel.



Global Fishing Watch heat map of fishing activity in the North Pacific Guard area of operation.

Supported by the intelligence effort to detect suspicious vessels of interest, Douglas Munro conducted at-sea inspections aboard 11 fishing vessels, from four different nations, and found 14 potential violations of regional fisheries conservation and management measures. Of note,

the cutter conducted three boardings on Chinese flagged squid fishing vessels on which serious potential violations were detected. When Douglas Munro began operations there were 31 fishing vessels in the designated patrol area. After these boardings were conducted with serious potential violations being found, however, nearly the entire fleet stopped fishing and fled nearly 850 nautical miles west across the Pacific avoiding further inspection.

“The violations detected and information gathered during this year’s operation highlight the need for robust maritime enforcement presence on the high seas,” said Captain Jason Brennell, Chief of Enforcement for the Coast Guard’s Seventeenth District. To achieve desired operational outcomes, the U.S. Coast Guard relies upon collaboration with like-minded partners, particularly Canada and Japan. Captain Brennell added, “The westward evasive movement of the fishing fleet indicates and potentially validates suspected illicit activity, and further demonstrates the need for more than a single vessel deployed to compel compliance at sea. Increased commitment from all partner countries to provide at-sea enforcement capability, particularly those nations whose vessels are engaged in fishing, is absolutely critical to both the health of world fish stocks and the future success of Operation North Pacific Guard.”

Operation North Pacific Guard upholds international maritime governance in the North Pacific by supporting several Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMO), multilateral bodies that adopt legally binding conservation and management measures to protect migratory fish stocks on the high seas. The convention areas of the North Pacific Fisheries Commission, Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and North Pacific Anadromous Fisheries Commission – RFMOs established to conserve and govern important commercial fisheries including squid, tuna, and salmon – are patrolled during the operation. These RFMOs have adopted monitoring, control, and surveillance measures, including high seas boarding and inspection in various forms. The United States views high seas boarding and inspection authorities in RFMOs to be critically important to monitoring and compelling compliance with regulatory measures. At-sea inspections level the playing field for legitimate operators and challenge IUU fishing bad actors by shining a light on their illicit activities.