

# **Rear Admiral Scott Clendenin, Assistant Commandant for Response Policy, US Coast Guard**

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**IUU fishing is a major international maritime security issue. Dr Lee Willett talks to one of the USCG's senior officers responsible for applying the service's new strategy for tackling IUU fishing**

In September the US Coast Guard (USCG) published a 'Strategic Outlook' for countering illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The strategy set out policy pillars and operational steps to take, including building co-operation with national and international actors addressing the issue.



*Rear Admiral Scott W Clendenin, Assistant Commandant for Policy, USCG (USCG)*

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“Fisheries are very much on the minds of coastguards and navies around the world,” Rear Admiral Scott Clendenin, USCG assistant commandant for response policy, told *Janes*. Coastguards and navies, alongside government and non-government stakeholders, are jointly planning and patrolling to address a complex threat affecting maritime and wider economic, national, and international security.

Predatory IUU fishing fleets essentially invade the market space for fisheries, said Rear Adm Clendenin. “They fish the fish the local fishermen were fishing – [a resource] that was a significant food source but also [an] income source for coastal communities – and then sell it back to those communities.” The USCG strategy, he explained, is based around “understanding where the predatory behaviour is, understanding if it is in your waters, and understanding the security and economic impact”.

Although providing presence and capacity building to counter IUU fishing is a long-standing USCG operational priority, the admiral noted, “the commandant [Admiral Karl Schultz] wanted to stitch it together in a strategic outlook”. The strategy is built on three pillars: promoting intelligence-driven enforcement at sea; illuminating the behaviour of predatory fishing fleets and other malign actors; and expanding multilateral co-operation.

“When you talk about ‘end state’ for the strategy, a lot of it has to do with the three pillars,” he explained. “We’re sharing information between countries so that we understand when there are predatory behaviours or fishing fleets, [and] that we have a shared knowledge of what [is required] to help counter it.”

Central to any ‘end state’, the admiral explained, is enhanced collective maritime domain awareness (MDA). Improving MDA and capitalising on the resulting information-sharing opportunities is both a procedural and technological matter, Rear Adm Clendenin explained. One key implementation step would be to make sure information is releasable and shared, and that people can enrich it from their various perspectives. The admiral highlighted the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), noting that NGOs hold some of the most informative data available on IUU fishing and underlined an “enormous opportunity” to improve engagement to support information sharing and exploitation. “How do you combine the information we have with that information in a meaningful way, and then share it formally with all of our international partners?” the admiral asked. “That’s a unique challenge .... There’s a lot of folks putting a lot of effort into that to ensure we move out on the intent of the strategy.”

Demonstrating how the USCG is working with other countries and NGOs to better address the risk, Rear Adm Clendenin pointed to Operation ‘Pacific North Guard’: an annual US-led multinational law enforcement operation designed to detect and deter high-seas IUU fishing. During a recent phase of the operation between July and September, Japanese and Canadian assessment of data provided by an NGO enabled identification of numerous vessels of interest for USCG enforcement operations. “By identifying the best targets and high-threat areas the USCG was able to focus effort to conduct at-sea inspections aboard 11 fishing vessels from four different countries, uncovering 14 serious violations,” he said.

MDA capacity and enforcement is also enhanced by greater at-sea presence, with the USCG working more closely with international navies and coastguards, as well as other US agencies, notably the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the State Department, and the Department of Defense (DoD).

Rear Adm Clendenin said the DoD is playing a greater counter-IUU fishing role today. “The DoD has taken [a] large interest ... because countries are citing this as a security concern and because it’s a unifying issue in a variety of regions. The DoD and combatant commanders are able to bring the inter-agency [aspect] together in a way, internationally, that is sometimes tough to do if they’re not at the table.” At sea, the admiral continued, DoD involvement “certainly brings scale ... but [also] presence and awareness to fishing fleets. A lot of information sharing happens through DoD with our foreign partners so [with] their awareness, advocacy, scale, and presence, they are a very important partner.”

In August, responding to international concern over reports of increased IUU fishing fleet presence just outside Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands exclusive economic zone, the USCG and US Southern Command partnered on Operation ‘Kuartam’ to deploy the Legend-class National Security Cutter USCGC *Bertholf* on combined patrols with an Ecuadorian naval vessel, with a focus on information gathering to support IUU fishing network analysis and disruption. “The leveraging of USCG capabilities to observe, collect, and share information on illicit activities occurring in remote areas beyond the reach of Ecuadorian maritime assets illustrated [how] the United States can assist other countries in policing and protecting their waters,” the admiral explained.

Rear Adm Clendenin said USCG deployment planning going forward will continue to be shaped through national and international partnerships. “It’ll be informed by a wide variety of internal priorities – by our security and defence priorities, and our outreach priorities – but will also be informed by what our partner countries are doing ... and [making] sure what we are doing is complementary to what they are doing because this is a global issue.”

*This article, first published 1 December 2020, is subject to a correction and has been amended.*