

Confronting Transnational Smuggling: An Assessment of Regional Partnerships
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and
Maritime Transportation
Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere
Statement by the Commandant
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Good morning, Chairmen Salmon and Hunter, Ranking Members Sires and Garamendi, and distinguished members of the Subcommittees. Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today and for your continued support of our Coast Guard. I look forward to discussing the challenges we face in confronting illicit smuggling in the Western Hemisphere and the consequences it has for our our country.

And, I'd be remiss this morning if I didn't start by recognizing the Department of Justice and our partner agencies from the Department of Homeland Security, who contribute greatly to the efforts to stem the flow of illicit traffic into the United States.

We continue to face a significant threat in the drug transit zones of the western hemisphere and the southern maritime approaches to the United States. Ruthless transnational criminal organizations – advancing their illicit trade through coercion, bribery and violence – create a destabilizing effect on both the governments and the economies of our Western Hemisphere partner nations.

For instance, for the second consecutive year, Honduras has the world's highest murder rate – a direct result of the massive influx of U.S.-bound cocaine entering Central America through the Western Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean. And as those drugs reach our shores, the activities of these sophisticated criminal networks have an impact on America's streets as well—in the form of gang violence and turf wars by urban drug dealers.

The Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime law enforcement in support of the Administration's National Drug Control Strategy and the Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime. On the front lines of our detection, monitoring, interdiction, and apprehension operations, the Coast Guard deploys major cutters, long and medium range fixed-wing aircraft, airborne use of force capable helicopters, and our law enforcement detachments embarked on U.S. Navy and allied warships to stop drug traffickers in the transit zone – *before* they can approach our shores.

And working with U.S. Southern Command and the Departments of State and Justice, we have established more than 40 maritime bilateral law enforcement agreements with our international stakeholders.

Our unique combination of ships, aircraft, authorities and partnerships has continuously proven to be an effective interdiction *system* when employed in the transit zone. Over the last five years, Coast Guard ships and law enforcement detachments operating in the offshore regions have removed more than 500 metric tons of cocaine, with a wholesale value of nearly \$17 billion.

This is more than *two times* the amount of cocaine – at *twice* the purity – seized by all other U.S. federal, state and local law enforcement agencies combined.

This is where we get the very best value for the taxpayer's dollar. It is also where we have our first *best* chance to address this problem: close to the source and far from our shores; where the drugs are pure and uncut; where they are in their most vulnerable bulk form; and before they are divided into increasingly smaller loads making them exponentially harder and more expensive to detect and interdict.

And it's not just about the drugs. For every shipment we interdict at sea, we gather valuable information about the sophisticated criminal enterprises that move these drugs. By understanding these criminal networks we are better prepared to combat other illicit enterprises, including human traffickers and international terrorists. Our interdictions remain a key weapon in the U.S. arsenal to combat transnational criminal networks.

The Coast Guard and its partners rely on this “cycle of success” to disrupt the networks behind illicit trafficking in the Western Hemisphere. Successful interdictions and subsequent prosecutions provide actionable intelligence on future events, producing follow-on seizures and additional intelligence, thus feeding the cycle. Our at-sea interdictions are the engine that drives this cycle – and our success.

More than half of the designated priority drug targets extradited to the U.S. from South America in the last 10 years are linked to Coast Guard interdictions. Over sixty named drug trafficking organizations have been dismantled because of investigations originating with or supported by Coast Guard interdictions.

The removal of these networks helped countries like Colombia restore citizen security and economic opportunity, contributing to a \$14 billion increase in imports of U.S. goods over the last 20 years.

But despite our successes, far too many illicit drugs still reach our shores. Our reduced number of ships can stop only a fraction of the contraband our intelligence tells us is moving. Erosion of this cycle of success, either through degraded intelligence, a reduction in ships and aircraft, or a decrease in prosecutions, will have chronic negative impacts on our Department's mission to secure and manage our borders.

You don't need to look any farther than the recent news reports from Chicago to get a sense of how these criminal networks are impacting our communities once these drugs reach the Homeland. The Sinaloa cartel uses the city as a distribution hub by exploiting people in underserved communities to traffic their illicit goods. The impacts of this cartel activity are felt throughout our communities and manifest themselves in a host of other problems effecting our society.

This problem is not going away. The flow of illicit trade – in drugs, in people, and in all the many forms it takes – continues to threaten our homeland. Those engaged in this business bring their traffic on, over, and *under* the sea and exploit our global supply and transportation chains to deliver their contraband to market. The offshore interdiction of illegal drugs in bulk quantities is critical to the safety and security of our Nation.

But even more important is understanding and disrupting the sophisticated criminal networks that transport these drugs, sow instability throughout Central America and Mexico, and adversely impact our safety, security and prosperity. As DoD rebalances the bulk of its fleet to the Western Pacific, and as Coast Guard cutters continue to age, I fear that this problem is only going to get worse. Sustaining the cycle of success, by strengthening international partnerships, investing in cutter and aircraft recapitalization, and leveraging interagency capabilities, will keep deadly and addictive drugs off U.S. streets, disrupt transnational criminal networks, create the space for security with Western Hemisphere partners, and facilitate the safe flow of legitimate commerce and transportation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.