

COAST GUARD DRUG INTERDICTION AND ENFORCEMENT IN THE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, FISHERIES, CLIMATE
CHANGE, AND MANUFACTURING

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE,
SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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COAST GUARD DRUG INTERDICTION AND ENFORCEMENT IN THE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, FISHERIES, CLIMATE
CHANGE, AND MANUFACTURING,
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in room SR-253, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Tammy Baldwin, Chairwoman of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Baldwin [presiding], Cantwell, Sullivan, Wicker, and Blackburn.

Also present: Senator Budd.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. TAMMY BALDWIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM WISCONSIN

Senator BALDWIN. Good morning.

I am calling the Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries, Climate Change, and Manufacturing hearing to order, and good morning and thank you all for your time this morning and for your attention to a very important topic.

I called for this hearing today because I am committed to fighting the deadly fentanyl epidemic on all fronts. The United States is facing the worst drug crisis in history with a majority of overdose deaths caused by fentanyl, and while we talk about these drugs in a more global sense, make no mistake this has very real impacts on people's lives.

Too many kitchen tables have an empty chair because of this scourge and I will leave no stone unturned to end it. In recent years fentanyl has killed thousands of Wisconsinites, devastating families and communities in every part of my state.

I have heard from mothers who lost children, cops and paramedics on the front lines, and advocates all demanding that we do more to end this crisis, and I know my colleagues hear the same resounding message in their states.

This Congress we took a step in the right direction when we passed bipartisan legislation to crack down on precursor chemical suppliers in China and drug cartels in Mexico that are producing these drugs and fueling this epidemic.

But there is more work to do. We must make sure we are putting every resource possible toward protecting Americans and stopping the movement of deadly illicit substances across our border.

In today's threat environment malign actors ship precursor chemicals from China to ports in the Western Hemisphere. Upon arrival criminal organizations process these chemicals into drugs including the synthetic opioid fentanyl that transit through the continent and devastate communities.

We are also increasingly seeing fentanyl-laced cocaine or other substances moving through our hemisphere, causing a dramatic rise in fatalities. The fentanyl crisis demands a whole of government effort.

The families I work for expect that all law enforcement and armed forces are working in lockstep, and today we are examining the role of the United States Coast Guard.

One of the Coast Guard's statutory missions is drug interdiction. Historically, this mission has been focused on cocaine, the primary illicit narcotic shipped via maritime transportation.

In recent years the Coast Guard has demonstrated the ability to play a role in the tracking and removal of fentanyl and its precursor chemicals. Given the crisis in our country we need to substantially increase this effort and I look forward to hearing recommendations from our witnesses.

The United States Coast Guard gathers intelligence, contributes assets, and conducts boardings of vessels of interest to identify, seize, or destroy illicit substances, primarily consisting of cocaine, methamphetamines or heroin.

The Coast Guard also contributes sea, air, and personnel assets to the joint interagency task forces to assist in tracking shipments of precursor chemicals and referring them to law enforcement and other partners for action.

Today I hope to hear about the Coast Guard's role in disrupting the fentanyl supply chain and opportunities to expand the Coast Guard's operational and intelligence capabilities to stop global drug movement.

Part of improving our approach means ensuring that the Coast Guard has the needed resources and tools at their disposal. Transnational criminal organizations have dramatically increased the quantity of cocaine they are smuggling through maritime routes. Yet, we have seen a decline in cocaine removals at the same time.

The Coast Guard is devoting fewer assets to the drug interdiction mission due to competing priorities and resource constraints.

We must align sufficient resources to this mission so that we can stop cocaine shipments on water where they are shipped in bulk quantities before they reach land and become much more difficult to interdict.

At the same time, the Coast Guard is experiencing acquisition delays, the most notable of which is the four-year delay in the off-shore patrol cutter procurement program.

I am concerned that we are not seizing every opportunity we can to stop precursor chemicals while they are being shipped from China.

And, finally, I am concerned about our most valuable asset, our people. As a part of my commitment to keeping Americans safe from illicit substances I want to identify ways to protect our Coast Guard men and women and the maritime public from exposure to dangerous drugs or chemicals during the course of their regular Coast Guard duties.

I am, therefore, including in this year's Coast Guard Authorization Act a provision that would require all Coast Guard teams to carry Naloxone or other opioid antagonists. In addition, the Coast Guard is currently 10 percent short of its enlisted workforce and has missed recruiting goals from Fiscal Year 2019 to Fiscal Year 2023.

This personnel shortage is felt across the services and impacts every mission including causing the closure of three seasonal stations in the state of Wisconsin.

The Coast Guard has laid up ships before their expected retirement date because there are not enough people to operate them. That means we have fewer ships to execute Coast Guard missions including the critical counterdrug mission.

It is imperative that the Coast Guard addresses workforce recruitment and retention challenges and that includes enacting reforms to ensure that the Coast Guard is a safe environment to work in—an environment that does not allow sexual harassment or sexual assault.

In addition, efforts to improve the culture of the services the Coast Guard must do more to keep its commitment to members and that commitment includes access to quality and affordable housing, medical care, and child care.

It is important to note that these impacts are particularly severe for junior enlisted families, the very ranks we need most today. I am working to include provisions in the Coast Guard Authorization Act that support these quality of life concerns because we want to help the Coast Guard attract and retain a qualified and dedicated workforce.

We owe the American public nothing short of the most exhaustive effort to stem the flow of deadly substances into our country.

I am now going to call upon our witnesses today. Ranking Member Sullivan is on his way and will be recognized for his opening statement when he arrives.

But we will hear from the witnesses and they will speak in order of rank: Admiral Lunday, Rear Admiral Burdian, Rear Admiral Little, and then Ms. MacLeod.

I thank you in advance for your opening statements and recognize Admiral Lunday.

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

Admiral LUNDAY. Good morning, Chair Baldwin, members of the Committee.

Chair, I request that my written testimony be entered into the record.

Senator BALDWIN. Agreed.

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you, Chair Baldwin.

Thank you for inviting me to appear for you before today to discuss Coast Guard drug interdiction and enforcement operations, and thank you for your enduring and strong support for the Coast Guard and our men and women, these young sentinels who have dedicated themselves to serve our Nation. They are the best from across our great United States and I am incredibly proud to serve with them.

Today our service is in greater demand than ever before by the American people, first for the operations we conduct across the United States and in U.S. territories, protecting and defending our borders and through counterdrug operations and other operations, and our marine transportation system that is made up of our ports and waterways that are so vital to U.S. economic prosperity and national security, and also for the Coast Guard's increasing global presence in Latin America, the Arctic, and the Indo-Pacific and in other places where our authorities, capabilities, and our operations make us a trusted and reliable partner across the interagency and with our allies and other nations who share our values.

The Coast Guard provides a unique and enduring value to the American people. Central to the Coast Guard's missions are maritime drug interdiction and enforcement operations.

Transnational criminal organizations are highly sophisticated and finance criminal cartels that operate across national boundaries smuggling drugs into the United States.

Cartels operating in Mexico receive the majority of cocaine sourced from Colombia and Ecuador and move it on transshipment routes through the eastern Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea for further transshipment to the United States.

Cocaine and other plant-based narcotics remain a mainstay of these criminal cartels but, as you noted, Chair Baldwin, they are also engaged in the manufacture and smuggling of deadly fentanyl into the United States, principally across the land ports of entry.

They also engage in human trafficking and weapons smuggling. This not only harms the United States, it also creates security challenges and destabilizes other nations in the region, and that fuels conditions that increase human insecurity and it spurs irregular migration that threaten our U.S. border.

The Coast Guard conducts drug interdiction enforcement at sea where the cartels are most vulnerable and where we have the advantage. We do this at sea present with at-sea presence of our major cutters, boats, and aircraft and our specialized law enforcement teams.

We do not do it alone. We work closely with the Department of Defense, represented here by Admiral Burdian and Admiral Little, with DHS partners like DHS Joint Task Force East, Customs and Border Protection, and Homeland Security investigations, and along with the Departments of Justice including DEA and the Department of State.

We work with allies and partner nations, sharing threat intelligence information and conducting combined operations at sea in the eastern Pacific and the Caribbean.

Over the past decade illicit trade in fentanyl and other synthetic drugs has surpassed cocaine as the most dangerous threat to the

American people and we remain focused on any movement of drugs that are coming toward the U.S. and stopping that movement.

Although we have not seen yet significant amounts of fentanyl smuggled in noncommercial means by sea we remain vigilant for that to change, and because these same cartels that smuggle drugs by sea also smuggle fentanyl. Coast Guard drug interdiction operations are essential to disrupting their revenue stream and also fostering information that we can use in criminal investigations to target their activities on fentanyl production and smuggling.

Our continued successful drug interdiction and enforcement operations also depend on the readiness of our people and our assets. That is both readiness to operate today and future readiness.

Our Coast Guard women and men, conduct these operations in a dangerous and unforgiving maritime environment against criminal smugglers who would do them harm.

They place themselves at risk to stop illicit narcotics from reaching our streets and harming the American people. We owe it to our workforce to provide them the best leadership training and tools to enable them to get the mission done and safely return.

I am grateful for your continued support in this effort. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you here today and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Admiral Lunday follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ADMIRAL KEVIN E. LUNDAY, VICE COMMANDANT,
U.S. COAST GUARD

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 ves-

sels (*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 in-

vestments 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.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Admiral.
Admiral Burdian.

STATEMENT OF REAR ADMIRAL JO-ANN BURDIAN, DIRECTOR, JOINT INTERAGENCY TASK FORCE SOUTH, U.S. COAST GUARD

Admiral BURDIAN. Good morning, Chair Baldwin. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today. I am truly honored to represent the women and men of Joint Interagency Task Force South.

We are a component of U.S. Southern Command and support the combatant commander's efforts to strengthen partnerships, counter threats, and build the team. According to the Perry Center, 40 of the 50 most violent cities in the world are in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Much of that violence is fueled by narcotics smuggling. Transnational criminals disrupt governments and destroy communities and families throughout the SOUTHCOM AOR.

Good morning, Ranking Member Sullivan.

In its 35 years of existence JIATF South has leveraged the authority, jurisdiction, and capability of five of the six armed services, 13 U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and 20 foreign partners to detect and monitor drug flows in the air and maritime domains throughout our 42-million-nautical-mile joint operating area.

Would you like me to pause for Senator Sullivan? OK.

Senator BALDWIN. He will follow—he will follow your testimony.

Admiral BURDIAN. Thank you, ma'am.

Our work together enables the disruption of narcotics consignments bound for the United States and keeps profit out of the pockets of transnational criminals.

Last year alone, we enabled the disruption of 361 narcotics shipments including the interdiction of over 300 metric tons of cocaine and 78 metric tons of marijuana valued at more than \$7 billion. This work represents over 25 percent of all known interdictions globally.

In 2023, the CDC reported a decline in drug overdoses in the United States for the first time since 2018 but that trend did not apply to cocaine.

Last year more than 29,000 Americans died from cocaine overdose, a number that is comparable to losing a small American

town, one that is just smaller than Manitowoc or just about the same size as Juneau every single year.

Cocaine-related deaths were five times higher than they were in 2014 when already—when over 5,000 Americans, which was already far too many, lost their lives to cocaine overdose. More than 70 percent of cocaine overdose deaths involved combining cocaine with an opioid, most often fentanyl.

Just as American victims mix their drug of choice, TCOs—transnational criminal organizations—or poly drug enterprises they traffic plant-based drugs like cocaine and marijuana, synthetic drugs like fentanyl alongside bulk cash, weapons, and people and they are driven by a single goal—profit.

Although we have not encountered fentanyl in the maritime our efforts advance investigations into criminal organizations who traffic fentanyl in the U.S. According to the organized crime drug enforcement task forces, last year 23 percent of their designated investigations that involved maritime interdictions in the JIATF South JOA were connected to organizations also linked to fentanyl or its precursors.

Nine percent of the investigations were linked to command and control elements of the most prolific international drug trafficking organizations.

I just want to emphasize the work JIATF South does advances investigations into organizations who traffic fentanyl into the United States.

Partnerships are at the core of our success. We integrate and investigate intelligence data from around the U.S. interagency with information provided by our foreign partners to develop real time targets that we monitor to turn over to our interdiction partners like the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard is the largest single provider of U.S. ship days and those days are augmented using their law enforcement detachments on allied vessels.

We began to use the ship's special mission, which is a repurposed commercial vessel under contract by SOUTHCOM, in 2017 as a force multiplier to enable partner nation interdictions.

In its time and service the SSM has supported the interdiction of over 40 metric tons of cocaine and marijuana and, moreover, has provided our partners with the expertise and experience to operate far offshore on their own.

Today, partner nations contributes over 80 percent of JIATF South supported interdictions. While we are grateful for the commitment of our foreign partners, U.S. law enforcement agencies benefit most from U.S. interdictions.

Simply put, more U.S. interdictions lead to more U.S. prosecutions, initiating a virtuous cycle of success. Information gathered during these interdictions drive further arrests and each arrest can provide witnesses, cooperators, and new sources of intelligence.

This intelligence feeds back into our targeting cycle, leading to more interdictions. In short, we can do more with more.

Multiple media outlets have reported a surplus in global cocaine supply that has driven prices down, increased consumption, and expanded markets into Asia and Europe.

This shift highlights the global nature of the threat and the complexity, maturity, and agility of transnational criminal organizations, underscoring the need for an integrated U.S. and international approach to narcotics—counter narcotics operations.

No U.S. Government entity is better poised to combat the threat than Joint Interagency Task Force South. Together, we set the global standard for interagency and international cooperation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I look forward to our discussion.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

Next, I will turn to my Ranking Member Senator Sullivan for his opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. DAN SULLIVAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA**

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this hearing today. I think it is a really, really important one as it focuses on the maritime drug interdiction issues, which is one element of our strategy that we all need to deal with.

An issue that is impacting every state in America and that is the unprecedented drug crisis especially with regard to fentanyl that is impacting every state. It is interesting and sad, from my perspective but my state in many ways is the furthest from the southern border and, yet, we are facing an unprecedented fentanyl crisis in Alaska.

In 2023, opioids killed more Alaskans than ever before. Drug overdose deaths in Alaska, the vast majority of which were fentanyl related, increased by more than 40 percent in Alaska, the largest percentage increase of any state in the country.

And to combat this I recently launched an initiative in my state with our Governor called the “One Pill Can Kill” campaign.

The point of this campaign is to go out to all Alaskans, especially our youth, to warn them of the threat of taking unprescribed pills. Counterfeit pills are incredibly difficult to spot and can contain deadly amounts of fentanyl. We are seeing this across every state in the country.

I do have to say although we are focused on maritime issues here, the failed open border policies of the Biden-Harris administration have accelerated this disaster. Homeland Security investigations estimates that Mexican cartels, some of which are actually operating in Alaska—in Alaska villages—this notorious Sinaloa cartel is in my state right now.

They are now making \$13 billion a year smuggling illegal immigrants into the U.S., 26 times what they made in 2018. Mass migration that the Biden-Harris administration has encouraged and allowed has caused a humanitarian crisis, a national security crisis, a health crisis and drug overdose crisis.

This crisis is also driven by illegal drug trafficking by transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, as was already mentioned, some of which is being done by maritime means.

Last week Vice Admiral Holsey, the military deputy commander of Southern Command, testified in front of the Armed Services Committee that, quote, “Transnational criminal organizations remain the primary threat to stability in the entire region.”

He also said these TCOs, these cartels, get at least one-third of their revenue from drug trafficking. Beyond drug smuggling the TCOs are engaged in arms trafficking, money laundering, human trafficking, and many other horrific crimes.

Interdicting drugs on the high seas is a key to combating the flow of illegal drugs into the United States and I want to thank the Coast Guard again for all their great work, and other various law enforcement agencies and partner nations around the hemisphere who do this crucial work. It is imperative.

However, our challenges are evolving and we must adapt accordingly. In the 2024 national drug threat assessment the DEA Administrator highlighted the Mexican cartels' reliance on companies in China to supply the pill presses and precursor chemicals needed to manufacture fentanyl that they are using to poison Americans.

I recently co-sponsored in the Senate with Senator Tim Scott the "Fend Off Fentanyl Act," which was signed into law. This legislation will help stop the flow of deadly fentanyl by directing the Department of Treasury to use economic national security tools to choke off the profits of the Chinese precursor manufacturers and Mexican cartels that push fentanyl across the border. It will help, but until we secure the border it will not be enough.

Finally, Madam Chair, I want to mention one other thing. The Trump administration, the Biden-Harris administration, have all announced agreements that they achieved with the communist dictator Xi Jinping that he would reduce the flow of precursor chemicals from China into the United States.

As usual, the Chinese Communist Party does not keep its commitments to the United States, whether to the Trump administration or the Biden administration.

This is what some of us call "promise fatigue" where the Chinese consistently commit at the highest levels of government—think about Xi Jinping and President Obama in the Rose Garden where Xi Jinping said, "we are not going to militarize the South China Sea."

They lie. Great powers do not lie but China does lie all the time and particularly when it comes to fentanyl.

The Congress of the United States in a bipartisan way is tired of hearing the Chinese making agreements with Republican administrations, Democratic administrations on fentanyl and never keeping their word.

The Chinese—the Chinese Communist Party is engaging in chemical warfare against United States. We are tired of it. Hear that, Xi Jinping and the rest of you Communist Party hacks. We need to hold their feet to the fire.

Finally, I just want to mention the Coast Guard. Again, you have the biggest fans in the world in my state, the great state of Alaska, with regard for the Coast Guard. We are committed to a recapitalization—a continued recapitalization of the fleet to provide you the resources and the ability to undertake this and the other numerous missions you undertake every single day to save lives in Alaska and Wisconsin and everywhere else across the United States.

So, I want to thank the Coast Guard and I am looking forward to hearing what you need from the Congress to be able to do this

mission—this critical mission—in a more effective way than you can be doing it now.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Senator Sullivan.

Next we are going to hear from Admiral Little.

**STATEMENT OF REAR ADMIRAL BOB LITTLE, DIRECTOR,
JOINT INTERAGENCY TASK FORCE WEST, U.S. COAST GUARD**

Admiral LITTLE. Good morning, Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss the important work of Joint Interagency Task Force West, or JIATF West.

JIATF West is INDOPACOM's standing counter narcotics task force. We utilize Title 10 authorities to provide Department of Defense capabilities in support of law enforcement counterdrug operations.

Comprised of members of the joint force, elements of the intelligence community and U.S. law enforcement, we identify threat networks and share that information with partners to reduce the flow of narcotics in the Indo-Pacific.

We specifically target networks associated with drug trafficking including precursor chemicals used to produce illicit drugs such as methamphetamine and fentanyl.

Our priorities are protecting the homeland, strengthening our network of partners, disrupting and degrading threat networks, and countering malign influences in the region.

My highest operational priority is identifying and stemming the flow of precursor chemicals and we have been successful in providing intelligence to support these efforts.

Our work has led to the indictment and seizure of illicit drugs in large quantities of precursor chemicals. Additional efforts have supported sanctions against multiple Chinese entities materially contributing to the production of synthetic opioids.

To succeed in our mission we rely on a network of key partners. Chief among those are the U.S. Coast Guard and JIATF South. We routinely share intelligence and information related to transnational threats that transcend geographic boundaries.

As we speak, JIATF West is sharing regionally derived intelligence that is informing active cases in the JIATF South area of responsibility and these will likely result in Coast Guard interdictions.

We also partner with Coast Guard training teams to facilitate instructional courses for international partners who may not have the expertise or resources to effectively fight transnational organized crime.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the important work my team at JIATF West does every day and I look forward to your questions.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Admiral.

And next Ms. MacLeod.

**STATEMENT OF HEATHER MacLEOD, DIRECTOR,
HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE,
U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE**

Ms. MACLEOD. Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, thank you for the opportunity to be here to discuss GAO's recent work on Federal efforts to counter illicit drugs.

Illicit drugs like cocaine and fentanyl and the criminal organizations that traffic them pose significant threats to national security. As you know, Coast Guard is the lead Federal agency for maritime drug interdiction. However, it faces significant challenges in carrying out its mission effectively.

My testimony today will focus on two main areas: first, key Federal maritime coordination efforts to counter illicit drugs and, second, challenges to the service's ability to carry out its missions including drug interdiction.

Regarding Federal coordination efforts, the Coast Guard coordinates with the Department of Defense, other DHS components, and participates in joint task forces to enhance drug interdiction efforts.

One key example is JIATF South which coordinates interagency counterdrug operations in the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and eastern Pacific. Just last week the Coast Guard, in coordination with JIATF South, offloaded thousands of pounds of cocaine that it seized in the Caribbean.

Such seizures demonstrate the value of task force efforts, but our work in 2019 and 2024 has shown that task forces have not consistently assessed their efforts. This is essential for making decisions about priority and resource allocations.

We have nine recommendations to the Coast Guard and others pertaining to task forces that remain unaddressed.

Second, the Coast Guard faces asset and workforce challenges that can impact its drug interdiction efforts. The Coast Guard's aging fleet of vessels and aircraft face maintenance and reliability issues.

Declining availability of these assets and delays in acquisitions of their replacements can affect the Coast Guard's ability to conduct its drug interdiction mission.

Our work has noted that acquisition program delays continue to affect the availability of Coast Guard assets. For example, the Coast Guard's newest cutters—the offshore patrol cutter and the polar security cutter—are intended to support law enforcement missions like drug interdiction and prevention of illegal fishing.

But we found that combined these two programs are billions of dollars over their initial cost estimates and more than two years behind schedule. We have made dozens of recommendations in those reports on how Coast Guard can better manage acquisition programs for new vessels and aircraft.

Another challenge I would like to highlight is uncertainty around the Coast Guard's workforce needs. In recent years, the Coast Guard has raised concerns that its mission workload has outpaced its workforce levels. Staffing gaps, particularly in specialized units like tactical law enforcement teams, can hinder drug interdiction efforts.

Despite these concerns, Coast Guard has conducted limited assessments of its workforce needs. Specifically, the service reported

that it has assessed needs for just 15 percent of its workforce, a process that it began 20 years ago.

The Coast Guard estimates that it is short thousands of service members. Without workforce assessments it does not know the true magnitude of the shortfall and which units or missions are most effective.

One of our recommendations from our review is that Coast Guard update its workforce planning document with timeframes and milestones for completing these assessments.

Finally, our work has identified challenges related to quality of life factors in healthcare and housing, among others, that may affect the Coast Guard's ability to retain personnel.

For example, many Coast Guard stations are located near vacation destinations or in remote areas which can make it difficult for service members to find available and affordable housing.

Earlier this year, we found that the Coast Guard has not conducted a survey about members' housing challenges since 2012. We recommended that the Coast Guard do so which would allow the service to better respond to members' housing needs.

In conclusion, while the Coast Guard plays a vital role in maritime interdiction it faces significant challenges carrying out this mission effectively. Continued coordination with partner agencies will be key as the Coast Guard faces declining asset availability and workforce shortages.

Addressing our open recommendations in these areas will help ensure that the Coast Guard is effectively and efficiently using its limited resources to carry out these critical missions.

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. MacLeod follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HEATHER MACLEOD, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-24-107785, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries, Climate Change, and Manufacturing, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has identified illicit drugs, and criminal organizations that smuggle them, as significant threats. Many federal departments and agencies, particularly the Department of Defense and DHS, collaborate in efforts to reduce the availability of illicit drugs by countering their flow into the U.S. Given the federal government's challenges responding to the drug misuse crisis, GAO added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to its High-Risk List.

This statement discusses (1) key federal coordination efforts to counter the maritime flow of illicit drugs and (2) challenges GAO has identified related to the Coast Guard carrying out its drug interdiction mission—and recommendations GAO has made to address these issues.

This statement is based on 36 prior GAO reports published from April 2010 through June 2024, along with selected updates on efforts to address previous GAO recommendations. For these reports, GAO reviewed agency documentation, analyzed data, and interviewed agency officials. For selected recommendation updates, GAO reviewed agency documentation and met with officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 105 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement. Agencies generally agreed with the recommendations. As of September 2024, 46 recommendations have been implemented. GAO continues to monitor the agencies' progress in implementing the remaining open recommendations.

View GAO-24-107785. For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or hmaclcodh@gao.gov.

September 19, 2024

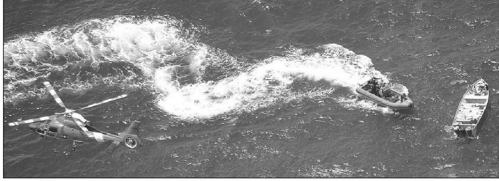
COAST GUARD

Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling

What GAO Found

Various federal agencies collaborate through task forces to detect and interdict the maritime flow of illicit drugs like cocaine and fentanyl. The task forces include members from Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) components, such as the Coast Guard. In 2019, GAO reported that the task forces generally coordinated effectively using mechanisms like working groups and liaison officers. However, task force agencies have not consistently assessed their efforts. GAO made 4 recommendations in this area.

Coast Guard Vessel and Aircraft Interdict Cocaine-laden Vessel Headed to U.S.



Source: U.S. Coast Guard courtesy photo. | GAO-24-107785

GAO has previously identified several challenges the Coast Guard faces that hinder its drug interdiction mission efforts. These include (1) asset readiness and availability, (2) acquisition challenges, and (3) workforce shortages.

- Coast Guard aircraft and vessels have not met availability targets. In 2023, GAO reported that Medium Endurance Cutters—a key asset for interdicting drugs—were not consistently meeting operational availability targets. The Coast Guard noted that the declining condition of the cutters risked decreased capability for meeting mission requirements.
- The Coast Guard faces persistent challenges managing acquisition program delays and affordability. For example, GAO found challenges with Coast Guard's acquisition of the Offshore Patrol Cutter that is intended to replace the Medium Endurance Cutter. This new cutter is essential for the service's drug interdiction mission, but acquisition delays are expected to create operational capability gaps through at least 2039.
- The Coast Guard reports having a shortage of about 10 percent of its enlisted workforce. However, as GAO found in 2020, the amount of the shortfall is unknown because the Coast Guard has not determined its service-wide workforce needs. As of November 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it completed workforce determinations for 15 percent of its workforce—as of September 2024, it had not implemented GAO's recommendation to develop a plan for doing so for the rest of its workforce. GAO has made 34 recommendations to address Coast Guard workforce issues; 28 have not yet been implemented.

United States Government Accountability Office

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to today to discuss Federal coordination efforts to counter illicit drugs and challenges the U.S. Coast Guard faces in carrying out its drug interdiction mission. The U.S. government has identified transnational and domestic criminal organizations trafficking and smuggling illicit drugs as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security. Provisional data from the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show nearly 100,000 drug overdose deaths during the 12-month period ending in March 2024.¹

As shown in figure 1, many Federal departments and agencies coordinate on efforts to counter the flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. Among them are the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which is responsible for securing U.S. borders to prevent illegal activity while facilitating legitimate trade and travel, and the Department of Defense (DOD), which is the single lead agency responsible for detecting and monitoring the aerial and maritime transport of illegal drugs like cocaine and fentanyl into the U.S.

Figure 1: Selected Federal Departments and Components with Counter Drug Missions and Activities



Source: GAO Summary of information provided by the entities listed. | GAO-24-107785.

^aThe Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) is a component of the Executive Office of the President. In addition to the entities shown, ONDCP coordinates with the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, and the Treasury on counternarcotics activities.

The Coast Guard—a multi-mission, maritime military service within DHS—is the lead Federal agency for maritime drug interdiction. It coordinates with DOD in joint task forces to carry out its drug interdiction mission.² In particular, the Coast Guard is a major contributor of vessels and aircraft deployed to disrupt the flow of

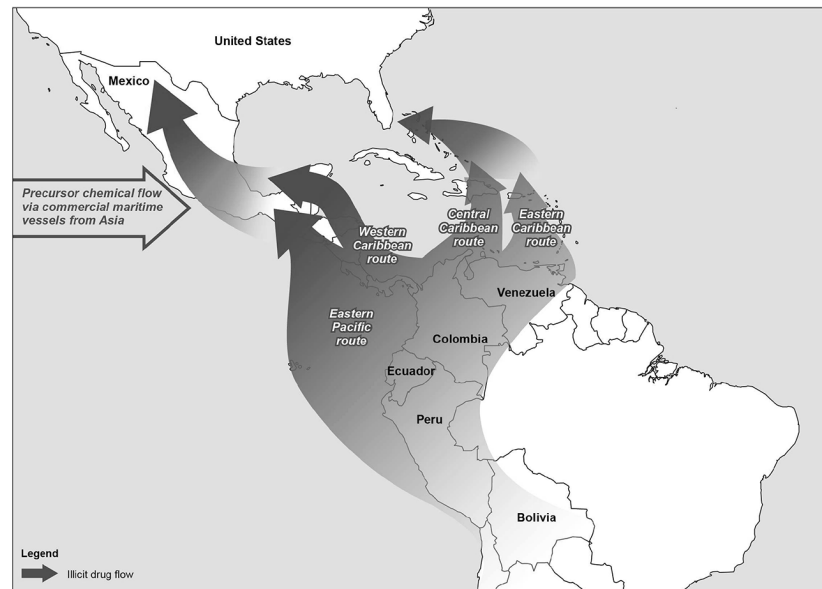
¹According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reported provisional counts for 12-month ending periods are the number of deaths received and processed for the 12-month period ending in the month indicated. Drug overdose deaths are often initially reported with no cause of death (pending investigation) because they require lengthy investigation, including toxicology testing. As a result, reported provisional counts may not include all deaths that occurred during a given time and are subject to change.

²10 U.S.C. § 124 designates DOD as the single lead agency of the Federal government for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the U.S. The Coast Guard, within DHS, is the lead Federal agency for interdiction of maritime drug smugglers in international waters. This is because the Coast Guard may make inquiries, examinations, inspections, searches, seizures, and arrests upon the high seas and waters over which the United States has jurisdiction to prevent, detect, and suppress violations of U.S. laws. See 14 U.S.C. § 522.

illicit drugs.³ The Coast Guard shares maritime drug interdiction responsibility with U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Air and Marine Operations and Border Patrol. According to the Coast Guard Commandant, in Fiscal Year 2023, the agency intercepted more than 212,000 pounds of cocaine and 54,000 pounds of marijuana.⁴

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the majority of the cocaine shipped to the U.S. travels on maritime routes from South America and through the eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea.⁵ Precursor chemicals may be shipped from Asia to Mexico, sometimes as legitimate commerce, where they may be combined into fentanyl or other controlled substances.⁶ Figure 2 shows maritime and land routes for precursor chemical and illicit drug smuggling.

Figure 2: Maritime and Land Routes for Precursor Chemical and Illicit Drug Smuggling



Source: U.S. Coast Guard based on the Consolidated Counterdrug Database; Map Resources (Map) | GAO-24-107785.

Note: Precursor chemicals are chemicals or substances that may be intended for illicit drug production.

Given challenges the Federal government faces in responding to the drug misuse crisis, in March 2021, we added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to our High-Risk List. We identified several challenges in the Federal government's response to drug misuse, such as the need for more effective im-

³ Coast Guard aviation and vessel assets include a fleet of about 200 fixed-and rotary-wing aircraft, about 250 cutters, and more than 1,600 boats. As of July 2023, the Coast Guard had a workforce of about 57,000 personnel. GAO, *Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed*, GAO-24-106374 (Washington, D.C.: April 9, 2024).

⁴ Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, *The Coast Guard's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request*, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., May 23, 2024.

⁵ Drug Enforcement Administration, *2020 National Drug Threat Assessment*, DEA-DCT-DIR-008-21 (March 2021). The majority of known maritime drug flow is conveyed via noncommercial vessels through the Western Hemisphere Transit Zone—a 6 million square mile area of routes drug smugglers use to transport illicit drugs that includes the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. GAO, *Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, GAO-14-527 (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2014).

⁶ Precursor chemicals are chemicals or substances that may be intended for illicit drug production.

plementation and monitoring, and related ongoing efforts to address the issue, including drug interdiction.⁷

My statement today discusses (1) key Federal maritime coordination efforts to counter the flow of illicit drugs to the U.S. and (2) challenges we have identified related to the Coast Guard carrying out its drug interdiction mission. This statement is based primarily on 36 reports published from April 2010 to June 2024. For the reports we cite in this statement, among other methodologies, we analyzed DOD, DHS, and Coast Guard policy, documentation, and data, and interviewed officials from agency headquarters and selected field units. More detailed information on our scope and methodology can be found in the reports we cite in this statement.

For this statement, we reviewed documentation and met with officials to obtain updated information on the status of agency implementation of selected recommendations through September 2024. In addition, we reviewed Coast Guard budget and performance documents since 2018 to determine the extent the service reported meeting its drug interdiction performance goals from Fiscal Year 2014 through 2023.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Federal Agencies Coordinate to Counter Illicit Drug Flow in the Maritime Domain, but Could Better Assess Their Efforts

Federal agencies coordinate with international partners and each other to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S. through the maritime domain. For example, in 2018 we reported that Federal agencies coordinated with foreign governments, such as China, Mexico, and Canada, as well as with international organizations, to limit the production of illicit synthetic opioids.⁸ They did this by sharing information on emerging trends, helping to expand the regulation of illicit substances, and building capacity to thwart the distribution of illicit drugs. We reported that coordination could also include the sharing of international data to analyze vessel movements that may indicate illegal activity.⁹

⁷ See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, GAO-21-119SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021). We issue an update to the High-Risk List every two years at the start of each new session of Congress. The most recent update was issued in April 2023. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, GAO-23-106203 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

⁸ GAO, *Illicit Opioids: While Greater Attention Given to Combating Synthetic Opioids, Agencies Need to Better Assess their Efforts*, GAO-18-205 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2018).

⁹ GAO, *Combating Illegal Fishing: Clear Authority Could Enhance U.S. Efforts to Partner with Other Nations at Sea*, GAO-22-104234 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 5, 2021).

Examples of Task Force Activity to Combat Illicit Drug Trafficking

Department of Defense Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South.

When JIATF-South received information about a potential illicit drug smuggling event, such as in the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, or the Caribbean Sea, it used available air and maritime assets to detect and monitor the suspect smuggling vessel. Once JIATF-South located the vessel and had assets in place, it turned over control of the assets to the relevant law enforcement agencies (e.g., the Coast Guard) to interdict the smuggling vessel and any illicit drugs on board.

Department of Defense JIATF-West. Task force shared intelligence on precursor chemicals with JIATF-South because precursor chemicals often pass from Asia to North America.

Department of Homeland Security Joint Task Force-East. Task force partner agencies conducted operations to counter threats from illicit pathways for drug and migrant smuggling in the eastern Caribbean.

Note: Each task force is directed by a member of the Coast Guard.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-24-107785

In addition, military and Federal law enforcement agencies coordinated through several task forces to detect and interdict illicit drugs, such as cocaine and fentanyl, and their precursors on maritime routes. DOD and DHS lead and operate certain task forces—Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South, JIATF-West, and DHS Joint Task Force-East.¹⁰ Each task force is directed by a member of the Coast Guard.¹¹

In 2019, we reported that the task forces generally coordinated effectively using mechanisms that aligned with leading practices.¹² These mechanisms, such as working groups and liaison officers, helped to minimize duplication of missions and activities. Figure 3 shows a seizure of more than 12,000 pounds of cocaine in the Caribbean Sea in September 2023, which was the result of JIATF-South coordination between Coast Guard, CBP Air and Marine Operations, and international partners.

¹⁰ An additional task force—Joint Task Force-North—consists solely of DOD personnel and does not generally operate in the maritime domain.

¹¹ In 2019, task force officials told us that Coast Guard leadership encourages participation from both DOD and DHS because the Coast Guard is both a military and a law enforcement agency. GAO, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, GAO-19-441 (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2019).

¹² GAO-19-441.

Figure 3: Joint Interagency Task Force-South Cocaine Seizure in the Caribbean Sea, September 2023



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Santiago Gomez. | GAO-24-107785

While such seizures anecdotally demonstrate the value of task force efforts, our recent work has shown that these task forces have not consistently assessed their efforts.¹³ In 2024, we made four recommendations to improve agencies' assessment efforts. Fully implementing these recommendations is essential for making decisions about priorities, resource allocations, and strategies for improvements.

Longstanding Challenges Hinder the Coast Guard's Drug Interdiction Mission Efforts

Challenges have hindered the Coast Guard's ability to meet drug interdiction mission demands. These challenges include (1) declining readiness of its vessels and aircraft, (2) acquisition associated delays in replacing them, and (3) workforce shortages and retention challenges. Notably, the Coast Guard has not met its annual primary drug interdiction mission performance target in any of the past 10 Fiscal Years.¹⁴ The Coast Guard's challenge of balancing its varied mission priorities has grown as it is called on to do more with its limited resources.

Noncommercial maritime smuggling involves the use of various vessels, including speedboats, fishing vessels, and submersible vessels. This performance measure assesses the percentage of cocaine directly seized or observed being jettisoned, scuttled, or destroyed as a result of Coast Guard actions relative to the total known flow of cocaine through the transit zone.

Coast Guard Faces Declining Asset Readiness and Challenges Acquiring Replacements

Declining Availability and Readiness of Assets and Infrastructure

Our work has shown that the Coast Guard's aircraft and vessels have faced readiness and availability challenges, while its supporting shore infrastructure requires considerable repair. Coast Guard assets have been in a state of decline for decades. For example, the Coast Guard relies on its Medium Endurance Cutters for its drug

¹³ GAO, *Counternarcotics: DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities*, GAO-24-106281 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2024) and *Department of Homeland Security: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces*, GAO-24-106855 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 7, 2024).

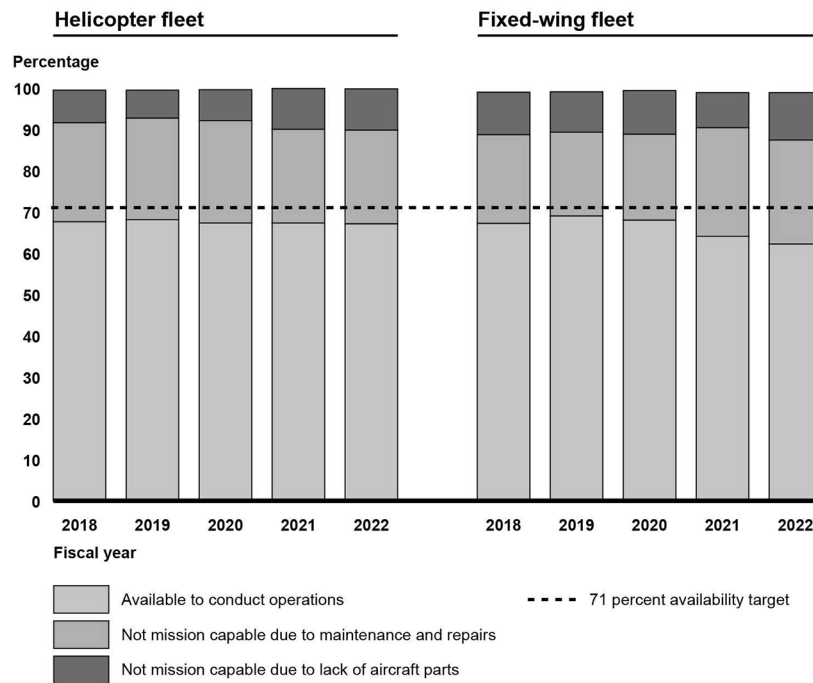
¹⁴ The Coast Guard's primary drug interdiction performance measure is its removal rate for cocaine from noncommercial maritime vessels in the maritime transit zone.

interdiction mission.¹⁵ However, we reported in July 2012 that Medium Endurance Cutters did not meet operational hours targets from Fiscal Years 2005 through 2011 and that declining operational capacity hindered mission performance.¹⁶ In June 2023, we reported that Medium Endurance Cutters were not consistently meeting operational availability targets, and the Coast Guard noted that the declining physical condition of the cutters puts them at significant risk of decreased capability for meeting mission requirements.

We made five recommendations to improve the Offshore Patrol Cutter acquisition program to the Coast Guard in June 2023.¹⁷

The Coast Guard's asset readiness challenges are not contained to its cutters. In April 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard's aircraft generally did not meet the Coast Guard's 71 percent availability target during Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022, as shown in figure 4.¹⁸

Figure 4: Coast Guard Helicopter and Fixed-wing Fleet Availability, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-24-107785

¹⁵The Coast Guard operates a fleet of 28 Medium Endurance Cutters, consisting of 14 210-foot and 13 270-foot Medium Endurance Cutters, along with the 282-foot Alex Haley Medium Endurance Cutter. These cutters are deployed for a wide range of mission operations, including search and rescue; interdicting illegal drugs and migrants; enforcing fishing laws; and securing ports, waterways, and coastal areas.

¹⁶GAO, *Coast Guard: Legacy Vessels' Declining Conditions Reinforce Need for More Realistic Operational Targets*, GAO-12-741 (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2012).

¹⁷GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design*, GAO-23-105805 (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 20, 2023) and *Coast Guard: Opportunities Exist to Reduce Risk for the Offshore Patrol Cutter Program*, GAO-21-9 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2020). In our June 2023 report, we also reiterated that eight recommendations we made in October 2020 to improve the program continued to have merit. As of August 2024, eight of these 13 recommendations were not implemented.

¹⁸GAO-24-106374. Coast Guard officials attributed the aircraft fleet generally not meeting availability targets to maintenance and repair challenges for its aircraft.

In April 2024, we reported the Coast Guard also faces key decisions in managing its aging aircraft fleet and implementing an extensive modernization program across all of its aircraft types.¹⁹ In particular, the Coast Guard is embarking on a significant operational change from a largely short-range helicopter fleet to a medium-range fleet. However, we reported that its related planning efforts raised serious questions, including how the medium-range helicopters will interact with cutters for its drug interdiction operations.

The Coast Guard has not fully assessed whether this transition will result in the type and quantity of helicopters needed to meet its mission demands—including for drug interdiction—in the coming decades. We recommended the Coast Guard assess different helicopters and conduct a fleet mix analysis to help ensure it identifies the necessary type and number of helicopters it requires to meet its mission demands. DHS concurred with this recommendation and we will continue to monitor Coast Guard’s efforts to address it.

Notwithstanding the readiness of Coast Guard assets, our work has also found that the service faces tradeoffs when making decisions regarding its vast, aging portfolio of shore infrastructure. In February 2019, we found that the Coast Guard was confronted with a costly backlog of shore infrastructure projects related to docks, air stations, and other infrastructure from which missions such as drug interdiction begin.²⁰ This backlog totaled at least \$2.6 billion at that time. We made six recommendations to address these issues, two of which the Coast Guard has implemented.

Acquisition Program Challenges

Our work has also found that the Coast Guard’s declining asset readiness is exacerbated by persistent challenges it faces managing its planned \$40 billion acquisition programs to modernize its vessels and aircraft. These challenges include:

Capability gaps from schedule delays. Delays experienced by the Coast Guard’s highest priority program—the Offshore Patrol Cutters—will exacerbate capability gaps.²¹ The Coast Guard plans to replace the aging Medium Endurance Cutters with Offshore Patrol Cutters. The Commandant testified in July 2024 that Offshore Patrol Cutters are to be essential assets for JIATF-South and its drug interdiction mission.²² However, in May 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard has delayed delivery of the first Offshore Patrol Cutter by 4 years, from Fiscal Year 2021 to 2025.²³ In June 2023, we reported that given the delays in delivery of the Offshore Patrol Cutters, the Coast Guard projects to have a reduction in asset availability—or a reduction in the number of cutters available for operations—starting in 2024 and through 2039.²⁴

Affordability concerns and difficult tradeoff decisions. As we reported in June 2024, the Coast Guard will have to make difficult decisions to address the affordability concerns surrounding its acquisition portfolio.²⁵ These concerns affect how Coast Guard prioritizes spending on aging assets, including those currently performing the drug interdiction mission.²⁶ Specifically, for over a decade and most recently in 2024, we have reported that the Coast Guard’s short-term budget decisions

¹⁹ GAO-24-106374.

²⁰ GAO, *Coast Guard Shore Infrastructure: Applying Leading Practices Could Help Better Manage Project Backlogs of At Least \$2.6 Billion*, GAO-19-82 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 21, 2019).

²¹ Offshore Patrol Cutters generally conduct the same range of missions as Medium Endurance Cutters, including search and rescue and interdicting drugs and migrants. Designed for long-distance transit, extended on-scene presence, and operations with deployable aircraft and small boats, these cutters are intended to provide offshore presence for the Coast Guard’s cutter fleet.

²² Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 24, 2024.

²³ GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Opportunities Exist to Improve Shipbuilding Outcomes*, GAO-24-107488 (Washington, D.C.: May 7, 2024).

²⁴ GAO-23-105805. We found that ship design instability contributed to Offshore Patrol Cutter schedule delays and made five recommendations to address this challenge. Coast Guard agreed with three recommendations and as of September 2024, addressed one of them. Coast Guard disagreed with the other two recommendations, including a priority recommendation. We stand by this recommendation as it aligns with our leading practices in shipbuilding. We have ongoing reviews of the program and will continue to monitor its progress toward design completion.

²⁵ GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisition: Actions Needed to Address Affordability Challenges*, GAO-24-107584 (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 2024).

²⁶ The Coast Guard’s planned investments for its portfolio of major acquisitions increased by \$8.2 billion since Fiscal Year 2018. The increase is primarily related to cost increases on the Offshore Patrol Cutter program and additional investments in medium-range MH-60T helicopters—both key assets for the drug interdiction mission.

have resulted in a buildup of near-term unaffordable acquisitions that have continued to put pressure on available resources.²⁷ In particular, we reported that the Coast Guard made short-term budget decisions that obscure the tradeoffs needed to balance the long-term affordability of the portfolio. In 2014, we recommended that the Coast Guard develop a long-term plan to manage its highest priority efforts. The Coast Guard agreed, and subsequent statute directed it to develop such a plan.²⁸ However, as of June 2024, it had yet to produce one.

Coast Guard Faces Workforce Shortages and Retention Challenges

Our work has shown that staffing shortfalls and poor workforce planning have affected the Coast Guard's ability to meet its mission needs, including for drug interdiction. Since October 2023, the Coast Guard has reported a nearly 10 percent shortfall in its enlisted personnel, due in part to having missed its recruiting targets in recent years, prompting it to reduce operational activities. In response, the Coast Guard has implemented plans to take several cutters out of active service, including three Medium Endurance Cutters—a mainstay of its drug interdiction efforts. Moreover, it has closed boat stations around the country due to a lack of personnel needed to staff them.

In May 2023, we reported that the Coast Guard's workforce challenges have persisted, and that the service may miss key opportunities to tackle these issues unless it implements plans to address future workforce needs and sets goals for retaining personnel.²⁹ In 2010, 2020, 2022, and 2024 we found that the Coast Guard had not adequately determined its workforce needs.³⁰ Specifically, in 2020 we found that the Coast Guard had assessed a small portion of its workforce needs through the workforce requirements determination process it began using in 2003. We recommended that the Coast Guard develop a plan for how it will meet its workforce assessment goals and this recommendation remained open as of September 2024.³¹ Further, as of November 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it had completed workforce requirements determinations for 15 percent of its workforce. Without this information, it does not have a sound basis for prioritizing resources effectively.

More specifically, we have previously reported on Coast Guard resource shortfalls and incomplete workforce planning for various units the service relies on to support its drug interdiction mission, such as its aviation workforce and specialized forces. Specifically, in April 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard had 387 of 4,134 (9 percent) of its authorized military aviation workforce positions vacant, as of July 2023.³² However the Coast Guard had not assessed and determined necessary staffing levels and skills for a large portion of its aviation workforce, including all 25 of its air stations and its major aircraft repair facility.

In November 2019, we found that the Coast Guard had not used data and evidence to fully assess its Deployable Specialized Forces. These are teams that deploy aboard Coast Guard cutters or U.S. Navy or Allied vessels to provide specialized capabilities for offshore drug interdiction and vessel interception operations, primarily

²⁷ GAO-24-107584; *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Portfolio Management Challenges*, GAO-18-454 (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2018); *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Limited Strategic Planning Efforts Pose Risk for Future Acquisitions*, GAO-17-747T (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2017); *Coast Guard Recapitalization: Matching Needs and Resources Continue to Strain Acquisition Efforts*, GAO-17-654T (Washington D.C.: June 7, 2017); and *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Better Information on Performance and Funding Needed to Address Shortfalls*, GAO-14-450 (Washington, D.C.: June 5, 2014).

²⁸ Pursuant to 14 U.S.C. § 5103(a), a status report on the Coast Guard's major acquisition programs is to be submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the Senate and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure every 2 years. Each report is to include certain information for each major acquisition program, as well as a long-term plan for the upcoming Fiscal Year, and for each of the 20 Fiscal Years thereafter. 14 U.S.C. § 5103(b), (e). In addition, the Commandant of the Coast Guard is to submit each long-term major acquisitions plan to the House Committee on Homeland Security. 14 U.S.C. § 5110 note.

²⁹ GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, GAO-23-106750 (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

³⁰ GAO-24-106374; GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, GAO-22-105208 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022); *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Enhance IT Program Implementation*, GAO-22-105092 (Washington, D.C.: July 28, 2022); *Coast Guard: Increasing Mission Demands Highlight Importance of Assessing Its Workforce Needs*, GAO-22-106135 (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2022); *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Organizational Changes and Determine Workforce Needs*, GAO-20-223 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 26, 2020); and *Coast Guard: Deployable Operations Group Achieving Organizational Benefits, but Challenges Remain*, GAO-10-433R (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 7, 2010).

³¹ GAO-20-223.

³² GAO-24-106374.

in the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean.³³ We recommended that Coast Guard assess its Deployable Specialized Forces' workforce needs. We continue to monitor Coast Guard's efforts to address this recommendation.

Challenges related to quality of life factors in health care and housing, among others, may affect the Coast Guard's ability to retain personnel. In April 2023, we found that Coast Guard personnel stationed in remote areas may experience challenges accessing medical care.³⁴ Specifically, we found that 17 of 43 Coast Guard clinics were located in medically underserved areas and 11 of 43 were located in at least one type of health provider shortage area. We recommended the Coast Guard obtain and monitor health care access data. Doing so would better position the Coast Guard to identify and address potential access concerns, which could affect retention.

We made 34 recommendations in our workforce reports, 28 of which remain unaddressed. We continue to monitor the Coast Guard's progress in implementing them.

In conclusion, Federal interagency collaboration, and Coast Guard's drug interdiction efforts in particular, are critical efforts to reduce the maritime flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. Defining and measuring what success looks like is essential to ensure that Federal efforts achieve the desired outcomes and resources are allocated efficiently. Further, the Coast Guard's challenge of balancing its varied mission priorities has grown as it is called on to do more with its limited resources. In this way, it is critical for the Coast Guard to address the longstanding challenges facing its drug interdiction mission—including better managing its acquisition efforts to replace aging assets and infrastructure and assessing its workforce needs.

Overall, we made 105 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement. Agencies generally agreed with the recommendations. As of September 2024, agencies had implemented 46 of them. Fully addressing our recommendations will help ensure that the service efficiently uses its available resources to carry out its drug interdiction and other missions. We will continue to monitor the agencies' progress in implementing them.

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you all for your testimony and opening statements. Your full statements will be made a part of the record.

I am going to—before we start a round of questioning I am going to recognize Chair Cantwell for an opening statement.

The CHAIR. Madam Chair, I will put a statement in the record and if we can go to questions that would be great.

Senator BALDWIN. Absolutely. Your statement—your opening statement will be made a part of the record.

I want to begin a round of questions. Each member will be given 5 minutes in this opening round and I want to begin by acknowledging that our Nation's effort to counter global drug trafficking requires a whole of government approach.

While the Office of National Drug Control Policy provides overall direction to these efforts each participating agency must also have clear goals, partnerships, and resource requirements.

Ms. MacLeod, can you please describe the Coast Guard's role in disrupting the flow of drugs and precursor chemicals within the national drug control policy and also what it would mean for the Coast Guard to have its own policy to prevent the smuggling of illicit synthetic drugs such as fentanyl?

Ms. MACLEOD. The Coast Guard plays an important role in this area. There is no doubt about that, and our work has shown that

³³ GAO, *Coast Guard: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities*, GAO-20-33 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 21, 2019).

³⁴ GAO, *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, GAO-23-105574 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2023).

the collaboration is very strong in these areas including JIATF South and JIATF West and other task forces.

However, our work has shown that the Coast Guard has struggled with foresight and managing toward a future that is different from the past, and I think that would be something important to look at in such a strategy.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

And, Admiral Lunday, if this committee were to direct the Coast Guard to work with its partners and develop such a strategy what activities would be prioritized and how would you go about putting together that strategy?

Admiral LUNDAY. Chair Baldwin, thank you for the question.

The Coast Guard's existing strategy exists in the Western Hemisphere strategy which is about a decade old and is principally focused on targeting the transnational criminal organization—excuse me, criminal organizations that are smuggling into the U.S.

We currently operate our counter narcotics efforts under the three national strategies for the Northern border, the Southwest border and the Southeast border, and our efforts are targeted in those areas under the national strategy.

But we are—it is time for us to look at updating that strategy for the Western Hemisphere so it fully aligns with the evolving threat that now includes fentanyl and other synthetic drugs.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

Admiral Little, I am interested in discussing with you the challenges of the Indo-Pacific and the work that the Coast Guard assets conduct to disrupt the global fentanyl supply chain.

Part of determining how best to allocate resources and identifying where gaps remain involves adequately measuring performance. I noticed that in 2019 the Government Accountability Office recommended your organization establish performance measures to track over time.

This recommendation was implemented and now, Admiral Little, can you please discuss what these measures show about the efforts to track the global movement of precursor chemicals to synthetic drugs and how to improve our approach?

Admiral LITTLE. Yes. Thank you, Chair Baldwin, for that question.

We did go—we have looked at that 2019 GAO report and verified, you know, what we did in 2019 and what I will say is I believe our metrics have evolved significantly and improved significantly from—even from that time to where we are now.

What has transpired in the last four or five years is a defense wide review. We have had a significant reduction in capacity at JIATF West and we have evolved as an organization as we have had to reassess where our priorities are—as I mentioned in my opening statement, our number-one priority being that of chasing the flow of precursor chemicals into the Western Hemisphere.

So we have evolved our evaluation metrics to align with four lines of effort to include our number-one priority which is getting after the flow of both fentanyl precursors and the equipment that supports the supply of those things.

Underneath that we have measures of effectiveness and measures of performance in the neighborhood of about 60 specific meas-

ures that seek to ensure that we are applying our efforts on our highest priority work and that we are getting the results out of that work to support success and, you know, just one example of that—of those results include increasing the number of interagency partners that we are working with, increasing the amount of cooperation, and significant increases in successful interdictions of precursors.

Senator BALDWIN. And on that topic can you describe how you are increasing cooperation with Mexican partners, specifically to stem the flow of precursor chemicals into Mexico, and how is that taking shape?

Admiral LITTLE. Yes. Thanks, Chair Baldwin.

Mexico is a critical partner in stemming the flow of precursor chemicals, particularly in the maritime environment, and as Ranking Member Sullivan mentioned in his opening remarks the type of flow and the way those chemicals move in bulk into the ports and then into inland Mexico for further production into fentanyl, methamphetamines, or other synthetic opioids.

Our role in that is to provide visibility and transparency to U.S. and international law enforcement to understand where are the chemicals, where are they coming from, and where are they headed.

When we identify those at risk for diversion we work very closely with U.S. law enforcement in Mexico City to get that information to SEMAR, the Mexican Navy who controls the ports, so that they can detain those chemicals and conduct further investigations prior to diversion for illicit use.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

Senator Sullivan.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Let me follow on that, Admiral Little.

Do you have concerns about corrupt Mexican officials in terms of who we are dealing with? Is that part of our problem that we cannot trust our partners?

Admiral LITTLE. Our role is directly with U.S. law enforcement so most of the information that we share will be specific to a load and then those relationships take place between those partners and the embassy.

From our observations, we have had good success with vetted crews and members of SEMAR and other Mexican organizations that we have high trust in.

Senator SULLIVAN. OK. And maybe, Ms. MacLeod or Admiral Lunday, you can address this, but my opening statement made the point that I think is very clear is that the Chinese make these commitments on precursor chemicals at the highest levels, whether in the Trump administration or with the Biden administration, and it just does not seem to go anywhere.

Do you—has GAO looked at this at all? Do we—would you agree with me that the commitments they are making—look, it is a dictatorship?

If Xi Jinping wanted to go to the precursor chemical people and say, hey, shut it down or you are going to be thrown in jail like he throws his foreign minister and defense minister and everybody else in jail he could stop it.

So what is your sense of what the Chinese are doing? And, clearly, they did not abide by the agreement they had with the Trump administration and it does not look like they are abiding by the agreement they have with the Biden administration. What is your assessment on that?

Ms. MACLEOD. GAO recently added drug—the drug crisis to our high risk area, which is an area that we continue to look at all aspects of how to manage the issues that the Nation faces. So through this work we continue to look at the various threats that—as they come through. So that that is something we have work underway on.

Senator SULLIVAN. But have you done an assessment on whether or not you think they are abiding by the agreement they did with the Biden administration?

Ms. MACLEOD. I do not recall that we have done work on that yet.

Senator SULLIVAN. Maybe you can take a look at that.

Ms. MACLEOD. I can look into it.

Senator SULLIVAN. Admiral, have you assessed that at all at your level?

Admiral LUNDAY. Ranking Member Sullivan, that is not a specific issue that we have looked at in the Coast Guard with respect to high level agreements between the U.S. and China. But we are, as you know, for the Arctic close to Alaska. We are very concerned about China's activities in and around the U.S. exclusive economic zone and so we are focused on that operational activity.

Senator SULLIVAN. Let me ask the panel as it relates to that question or what you just raised.

Just in my state—you have seen it last summer and particularly just in the last two months in Alaska—we have had a joint Russian-Chinese naval task force of seven ships last summer, or two summers ago, in Alaska waters.

Last summer, a joint Chinese naval task force, 12 ships in our waters—a joint Chinese-Russian strategic bomber task force that we—in our ADIZ a few months ago—actually, 6 weeks ago.

Chinese surface vessels in our Alaska waters four weeks ago and this past weekend with this big Russian-Chinese military exercise, four ADIZ—three ADIZ incursions that we had to go intercept those guys in one week, And naval assets off the coast of Alaska, including two nuclear subs from Russia 50 miles off the coast.

My question is the Coast Guard has limited assets. You have gone and shadowed these big operations. But how do you divide that up with the Navy, with INDOPACOM?

Two summers ago when we sent one 150-foot Coast Guard cutter to go shadow that seven-ship Russian naval joint task force off the coast of my state.

I love the Coast Guard, but I let senior military officials know that was not sufficient, right. If there was a joint Russian naval task force that large off the East Coast we would have sent a carrier strike group to go greet it.

So last summer when they came back—and they are going to keep coming, right. This is just—they sent a 12-ship joint naval task force. We did send four destroyers, P-8s, and this summer we

have a destroyer and a national security cutter up in Alaska shadowing these aggressive operations.

But how do you—how do you divvy up the Coast Guard DOD assets up in the—up in Alaska where there is so much activity going on with great power competition? The one thing we do know is if we do not show up with our own force and our own weapon capability they are going to keep doing this.

Would you agree with me on that, Admiral?

Admiral LUNDAY. Yes, Ranking Member Sullivan. Thank you.

Senator SULLIVAN. And then how do we—and then how do we do—how do we divvy up those assets between the Coast Guard and DOD in what is becoming a really, really competitive sphere of competition in the waters and air and subsea off the coast of Alaska?

Admiral LUNDAY. Ranking Member Sullivan, you mentioned the Coast Guard cutter Stratton meeting presence with presence this last weekend for the three Russian ships. One was a submarine.

Now, the Coast Guard is unafraid out there but we are not alone. All of our activities are fully coordinated with U.S. Northern Command, Indo-Pacific Command and Alaska Command.

And so how we decide to meet presence with presence is fully coordinated even when the Coast Guard is operating under our own organic Coast Guard authorities.

And so we remain in full coordination with them. We also coordinate with our Canadian allies on over flights of Chinese research vessels that may be operating in that area as well.

And so this is a sustained operation that we have in place to make sure we meet presence with presence and demonstrate the importance of U.S. sovereignty not only in our waters but ensuring that these Russian Navy vessels and the PLA Navy vessels—the Chinese warships—that they are operating consistent with customary international law and that they know the U.S. is watching.

Senator SULLIVAN. Do we need more assets up there, Coast Guard or Navy?

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you for the question, Ranking Member Sullivan. We do.

As you know, we are working hard to sustain the existing assets we have while we also look to modernize the Coast Guard fleet by recapitalizing them, not only our national security cutters but the new offshore patrol cutter and ensuring its presence.

We have two of the new offshore patrol cutters once they are built, which will be home ported—together to be home ported in Kodiak, and then also along the West Coast and other areas where they will be able to provide that increased presence.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

And next I recognize Chair Cantwell.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MARIA CANTWELL,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON**

The CHAIR. Thank you, Madam Chair, and I want to follow along Senator Sullivan. I would have gotten to this same subject but since you have gone here let us go here first.

And I am not sure there is much daylight between Senator Sullivan and I on this issue. When I think about all the attention we give to the South China Sea how about a little bit of attention in the Arctic?

So we are having incursions, correct, by the Russians. Let us just get that just—

Admiral LUNDAY. We have seen the Russians cross into our exclusive economic zone, yes, Chair Cantwell.

The CHAIR. OK. So we know it is happening, and I am extremely concerned about the fact that President Putin has announced that Russia will allow fishermen to fish in these international waters which is a direct threat to our seafood sector, and the fact that the Coast Guard is the front line, and so I think we need to know from the Coast Guard what resources you think that we need to have?

Now, just to throw in the original focus of drug interdiction, when I look at it over the past decade the flow of cocaine through the maritime environment has doubled while the Coast Guard removals have remained flat.

And so now that cocaine is being cut with the deadly fentanyl if the Coast Guard had more ships at its disposal what could you do to boost those interdiction rates—now I am talking all over—and what else do we need to do to increase those interdiction rates?

And, look, I believe the Coast Guard does many—you have five missions and we put a lot on you, but I think we are asking let us go and argue for a more focused approach in the Arctic and a more focused interdiction approach.

But you have to tell us what resources you need and what you think that we could do in stopping chemical shipments or stopping traffickers before they get a chance to turn this into deadly narcotics?

So I was actually going to ask you, Rear Admiral, but anybody who wants to answer that question.

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you, Chair Cantwell, and I will start. Thank you for the question.

So we have received great support from the Congress of the administration to make key investments in sustaining our current readiness and modernizing our assets. But as the Commandant has been clear publicly and in testimony, we will need more going into the future.

Today, the Coast Guard's discretionary budget is \$12.3 billion with a capital improvement budget of \$1.6 billion. Going forward, the Coast Guard is a \$20 billion organization.

We need today a \$3 billion capital procurement and improvement budget in order to do the modernization necessary, and the remainder of that—the \$16 billion—is needed to sustain our aging assets that we have in place.

That will enable us to deliver new assets—cutters, boats, aircraft, and other systems, along with the people, which are our most precious resource, to be able to provide the presence needed to do those missions.

The CHAIR. Well, I definitely could ask lots of questions about Cape D and assets and their future and missions. But in this regard what do we—does the Coast Guard have a draft out of that \$3 billion that would be necessary for a larger Arctic presence for

both the incursions that are happening by the Russians, the threats of the Chinese pretending to be an Arctic nation when they are not an Arctic nation, and to help in the interdiction? Do you have a proposal within that \$3 billion?

Admiral LUNDAY. Chair Cantwell, we do have—in addition to the Fiscal Year 2025 President's budget request we also have an unfunded priority list that identifies items for increased purchase of spare parts for our aging cutter fleet, also parts for our aviation fleet both fixed wing and helicopters, as well as increased funding for the recapitalization of assets to be able to accelerate the work that we need to do.

The CHAIR. Could we get a plan from the Coast Guard on what would increase your interdiction capacity to try to address the fact that we have seen this huge increase in supply and not as much interdiction?

So we want to help you get the assets, and then separately I would like to see a number—that is, what would a larger—I do not know what Senator Sullivan would call it. You know, the Russians are going to continue to provoke.

But what we want to do is to have, as you described it, a presence there and to be serious about—I mean, we have fishermen up there that the fleet—Russian fleet—are coming up next to fishing vessels.

So we want to know what that plan would look like out of the \$3 billion, too. So more interdiction writ large and more capacity in the Arctic meeting, as you described, presence with presence.

If we could get—what of your \$3 billion proposal would be addressing either of those and if that is not crisp if you could get us something that is crisp because I think Senator Sullivan and I plan to continue to communicate about this issue.

So, and Chair Baldwin, thank you for having the hearing to begin with and getting all of us here to talk about this. So could I get a commitment, Admiral, for that plan?

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you. Thank you, Chair Cantwell. Yes, we will follow up with briefings and information for the record in response to your questions.

The CHAIR. Thank you.

Senator BALDWIN. Next we have Senator Blackburn.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM TENNESSEE**

Senator BLACKBURN. Madam Chairman, thank you so much and I want to thank you for the hearing today. I think that looking at what is happening on the world stage with the cartels and the drug trafficking, the human trafficking, is something that we are continuing to see more of and the fact that these precursor chemicals seem to be coming in by the container load, as one of our Tennessee sheriffs said, when they apprehend drugs now. They used to apprehend things in grams and now it is all in pounds.

So we appreciate what the Coast Guard does. Admiral, I do have a question about the budget justification that states that failing to achieve counterdrug performance measures was due to a decrease in the number of surface assets due to reallocation to migrant interdiction operations, and we know that a decade ago that the

Coast Guard would interdict 15 percent of estimated cocaine maritime drug flows and in 2023 the numbers were 3.6 percent.

So do you continue to see a reduction? Do you expect to continue to see a reduction in drug interdiction because of the illegal migrant flows?

Admiral LUNDAY. Senator Blackburn, thank you for your question. So I was the Atlantic area commander for the Coast Guard in 2023.

As I took command in 2022 we were beginning to see an uptick in regular maritime migration from Haiti and from Cuba moving in the south Florida straits and off the windward pass toward south Florida.

So I made the decision after notifying the Commandant that we were going to begin to shift major Coast Guard cutters, aircraft, and personnel from the counterdrug mission, which is about saving lives and protecting our border, but over to the effort to stop the irregular maritime migration toward the U.S., which is also about saving lives and protecting our border.

Our mission there, which is conducted in a task force—a Department of Homeland Security Task Force—is to prevent a maritime mass migration that would it occur, would present a national security threat to the U.S.

The last time that happened was in 1994 from both Haiti and Cuba. And so we surged assets starting in August 2022 to prevent that from happening, maintaining a higher than 80 percent at sea interdiction rate and, again, our mission is to interdict those ventures—those migrant ventures—as far from U.S. shores as possible and then rapidly repatriate them to their country of origin.

So it is a lifesaving and a border control mission, and over the last two years we have been successful in preventing a maritime mass migration.

We will always have a presence to prevent that pressure against the U.S. southeast border and now we have begun in the last several months to shift those major cutters back to the drug interdiction mission working for Admiral Burdian at Joint Task Force.

Senator BLACKBURN. OK. Not to interrupt, but I do want to ask you this. Going back to February 2023 when you started to see an uptick and a skyrocketing in the numbers of the illegal migrants you had two senior members of the Coast Guard that wrote an article and they talked about the migrant interdiction operations were in a state of emergency.

So what—tell me where you put the number to say we are now in a state of emergency and how many a day, a week, a month, a year? What are you facing?

You have referenced twice when you got to that state of emergency. So are we still in what you would classify as state of emergency?

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you for the question, Senator Blackburn.

So under our plan, which is a homeland security plan that we lead, we entered a surge phase for prevention of a mass migration.

So it is not—emergency was not a term we were using at the time but we were seeing a historic surge in a regular maritime mi-

gration and so we took an urgent approach to address that. And so——

Senator BLACKBURN. OK. Let me ask you this, because with some of the migrants, these illegal aliens that come to the southern border or you are interdicting them at sea, we know that there are gang members, Tren de Aragua—TDA—the Venezuelan gang. You also have MS-13.

These are dangerous people. So what are you doing to protect our men and women in uniform so that they are going to be safe as they are handling these instances?

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you, Senator. So, first, we make sure that our people, our Coast Guard men and women that are conducting this mission and encountering migrants at sea, are well trained and that they have the equipment they need to be able to process and then repatriate those migrants safely, and then continue to treat each person we encounter with dignity and respect.

Until we know their background, and we do collect biometrics—that is an expansion of the capability that we have. We started that in 2023. So we better understand who we are encountering at sea.

Senator BLACKBURN. OK. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

Next, we have Senator Budd.

**STATEMENT OF HON. TED BUDD,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

Senator BUDD. I thank the Chair and I thank the panel for being here.

Admiral Lunday, I would like to ask you for a status update. As you know, there is an ongoing environmental emergency in Buxton Beach, North Carolina, which is part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

Before 2013 the Navy and Coast Guard they stored fuel at the beach and it used to be buried but now oil is washing onto the beach and leaking into the ocean. Folks in the area are rightly concerned and frustrated because this has gone on for more than a year.

There are three primary Federal agencies with responsibility here. It is the National Park Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Coast Guard. Now, I know that the Coast Guard is working with the other relevant agencies but—and then the Army Corps of Engineers recently announced they are deploying a team to monitor and take potential actions if petroleum releases are observed.

But is the Coast Guard involved with these efforts?

Admiral LUNDAY. Senator Budd, thank you for the question. I first became aware of this issue when I was commanding Atlantic area last year and I began to receive e-mails directly from local residents and community members in the area and in Buxton, and so I became familiar with the issue and what we were doing working with the National Parks Service, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Navy and we continue to be involved in those efforts.

As you noted, Senator, I noted that the Corps of Engineers last Friday deployed a team to begin removing potentially contaminated

soil and they announced that they awarded a contract to bring in additional equipment to begin to remediate some of the potentially contaminated soil in the area.

But the Coast Guard remains fully involved in that and in coordination with the Corps, with the National Parks Service and the Navy.

Senator BUDD. So you do agree that there is an active spill? And, first of all, thank you for your efforts through the Coast Guard on this, but you do agree there is an active spill?

Admiral LUNDAY. Senator, we sent Coast Guard pollution responders earlier in the year and last year to determine whether or not we could take action as if it was an oil spill into the water.

As we arrived on scene we did not detect a level of—or detect any spill that we could respond to under our authorities. That did not mean there was nothing that could be done because there are other authorities that the Army Corps and others are using and that we are leaning on to be able to address the problem.

But at the time in our response we have not seen an active spill that enabled us to use our organic Coast Guard oil spill response authorities.

Senator BUDD. Has the Coast Guard determined whether there is an authorized program it can use to remediate the site?

Admiral LUNDAY. Well, we are working with the Corps of Engineers and the Parks Service to look at that, Senator, and so that is part of a Federal team effort to address the challenges there.

Senator BUDD. One more question on the authorities. Would it be possible for the Coast Guard's oil cleanup authorities to be used here since petroleum is washing into the ocean? I just want to be clear on this.

Admiral LUNDAY. Senator, although we have not seen oil washing into the ocean specifically but if we do detect that our oil spill authority response authorities could be used.

So we are continually in communication with, not only the Federal partners, but with the local community and if there is oil going into the water we will respond under that oil spill response authority, yes, sir.

Senator BUDD. Again, I know there is multiple agencies involved here. How long, in your best estimation, would it be before those that are concerned—all of us in North Carolina are concerned about this—how long do you think it can be before we expect these are all cleaned up?

Admiral LUNDAY. Senator, I would like to get back to you with a briefing along with the Corps of Engineers so we can fully answer that question and provide that for the record, sir.

Senator BUDD. Thank you. I would ask the Coast Guard to keep working as you are with every other involved party to end this environmental emergency now. This needs to be cleaned up without further delay and, again, I want to thank you for your efforts through the Coast Guard.

I want to ask you a question related to what Senator Blackburn was talking about with drug trafficking and this is regarding trafficking in the Middle East including drugs trafficked on the fishing dhows. It has been—they have been used to finance Iran's malign activities.

If the Coast Guard is—if your assets are operating in the CENTCOM AOR and you discover illegal narcotics aboard a vessel what happens to those narcotics and to the crew that is attempting to traffic those illegal narcotics?

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you for the question, Senator Budd.

Our forces over there—and we have almost 400 Coast Guard men and women and six Coast Guard cutters permanently stationed there—they operate under the command and control of U.S. Central Command and then Fifth Fleet naval central forces under the command of Admiral Wikoff. So they are performing a Department of Defense mission.

I do not represent the Department of Defense today, Senator, but in my experience as a force provider to them our crews typically, when they encounter a dhow—one of these vessels that is smuggling drugs—we will destroy the drugs at sea, gather information about the master and the crew of the vessel, and then we will disembark the vessel.

Senator BUDD. Thank you, Admiral.

Is it—this is a “yes or no” question—is it fair to say that these would-be drug traffickers face no other punishment other than having their drugs seized?

Admiral LUNDAY. In my experience in that scenario, that is correct, Senator.

Senator BUDD. Thank you.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you. I am going to start a second round of questioning and go a little bit out of order to allow Senator Sullivan to go first because he has another appointment.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and I just have one final question. It is an important one.

So, as Senator Cantwell mentioned, the Russians have announced that they are going to stop even abiding by EEZ rules when they are fishing and they are going to go into other people's EEZs.

This is in line with other dictatorships like the Chinese with their IUU fishing. Senator Whitehouse and I have been working on a bipartisan bill dealing with IUU fishing that would target China primarily with more naval and Coast Guard assets.

My question, Admiral, maybe you can take it or anyone else from JIATF West or South because it is—IUU is a giant issue all over the world particularly with these Chinese gray fleets—is that in addressing the IUU fishing problem in our fish bill—that is the name of our bill to address IUU fishing which the Coast Guard helped us write—provides assets.

But tying that problem back to the topic of today's hearing, is there overlap in terms of assets and efforts and resources that can be used in the counterdrug mission that can also be used in combating IUU fishing particularly as it relates Chinese use of precursors on the drug issue and the Chinese fleets being the biggest violators of IUU fishing in the world?

Admiral, maybe take a crack at that and then anyone else.

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you, Ranking Member Sullivan.

It is an important question and I thank you for your support to strengthen the Coast Guard's tools and the Federal Government's tools to address the problem of IUU fishing, a global problem but

one that actually impacts our seafood industry as well, and so I thank you for the additional tools.

In terms of the—a cross connect between what we may be seeing in IUU fishing and drug interdiction or the drug problem, we are looking closely at that.

We see these distant water fishing fleets travel around the world, stay persistently at sea, and engage in IUU fishing, and that destabilizes maritime nations that are trying but may not have the capability to protect their own waters, and that could be a connection to challenges to movement of drugs and other malign activities.

So it is an area we are focused on.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Well, we want to work—continue to work with you on that because they are both really important topics.

And, again, Madam Chair, thank you for holding this hearing and I appreciate you letting me cut in line.

Senator BALDWIN. No problem.

I want to go back to drill down a little deeper on some of the asset and resourcing issues. So as we have heard discussed already more cocaine is entering the country now compared to five to 10 years ago and, in fact, the flow of known cocaine into America has doubled over the last decade while the amount interdicted by the Coast Guard has remained flat over the same period of time.

The Coast Guard has not met its mission performance target for cocaine interdiction once in the past 10 years. So I want to start with you, Admiral Burdian. Cocaine is primarily trafficked in your areas of operation and it is now, as we know, frequently being cut with fentanyl, leading to tragic losses across America.

I am concerned that we are not resourcing the Coast Guard sufficiently to address that threat and so just how much additional cocaine could be stopped from reaching this country if your organization received additional Coast Guard sea and air assets as well as personnel, and is there a specific Coast Guard asset whose shortage most affects your mission?

Admiral BURDIAN. Thank you for the question, Chair Baldwin.

I am proud to say that today we do have six Coast Guard cutters operating under the tactical control of JIATF operating between the eastern Pacific and in the Caribbean, as well as a law enforcement detachment on board an allied vessel.

So we have seen a restoration of those forces in support of JIATF South's detection and monitoring mission. While I could not speak to how much more is enough, there really is no replacement for U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement capabilities and authorities in the JIATF South JOA.

When the Coast Guard conducts an interdiction we not only remove those narcotics from the water but the pocket litter, the electronics, that intelligence is exploited by those crews and the individuals who are involved in the smuggling effort are brought back to the United States to the Department of Justice for prosecution, and that work really contributes to the broader U.S. efforts to dismantle the transnational criminal organizations who are conducting the trafficking.

I would like to mention also we have six partner nations contributing their forces in the eastern Pacific and another six partner na-

tions and an allied partner operating in the Caribbean and they are doing extraordinary work.

I mentioned they contribute to 80 percent of the 307 metric tons that were interdicted, supported by JIATF South last year, and they are providing some information. They give us biometrics. They exploit the pocket litter, and that goes into U.S. databases for our use.

But more Coast Guard cutters are vital to the effort and the best Coast Guard cutters, the national security cutters—we have got two of them in the JOA right now—are exceptional assets.

Their ability to deploy law enforcement teams, utilize airborne use of force, the stability, the sea keeping of those assets, is simply irreplaceable.

The medium endurance cutters who do come down to the joint operating area they do tremendous work. Those crews are working so, so hard and I value all of them. But it is difficult. They are operating aging assets that break frequently and their embarked airborne capability is then not usable.

We simply—we lose ship days to the need to conduct emergency maintenance and repair on those assets. The fast response cutters, when we do get them down in the joint operating area—those are the newer 154-foot patrol boats—are also extraordinary. I think the data would tell you they are about 40 percent more effective than medium endurance cutters.

However, part of the package that is necessary to interdict these fast-moving assets is that airborne use of force capability from the Coast Guard helicopter interdiction squadron.

So best for us is a functioning, trained crew who comes in with an airborne use of force helicopter, a surface use of force capability that can deliver that law enforcement with those highly trained boarding teams.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

And, Admiral Lunday, can you describe for the Committee how the Coast Guard balances risks and competing priorities when allocating assets between the counterdrug mission and other missions?

And you were just describing a little bit about the need to do some of that pivoting with regard to Haiti and Cuba and, you know, when you described the surge in maritime migration and the mission to prevent that?

Admiral LUNDAY. Thank you, Chair Baldwin.

The top mission for the Coast Guard is—that is our North Star is search and rescue and then ensuring the operation and defense of a marine transportation. That is so vital to our economic prosperity and national security.

And so we have not taken any reduction in the level of commitment to forces and operations to ensure we perform those missions.

As you know, we have a 10 percent shortage in our enlisted workforce—the backbone of our force—and so because of that we have had to take actions to lay up three of our 210-foot cutters and seven patrol boats because we did not have enough Coast Guard men and women to crew them.

Now, we are making progress on recruiting and I can talk about that, but the cutters we have laid up would have otherwise been

operating and conducting drug interdiction operations or other high-priority operations that we have been discussing.

Senator BALDWIN. And, Ms. MacLeod, from your vantage point as a subject matter expert can you provide an assessment of what new technology or updates to existing platforms would yield significant improvements in the Coast Guard's drug interdiction mission?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes, thank you.

Technology is critical for Coast Guard operations. However, the Coast Guard has a long history of problems managing these resources. Our work has highlighted many areas.

We currently have more than 50 open recommendations to the Coast Guard to help them manage resources. These include: workforce planning, delayed acquisitions, and shore infrastructure resources, all of which are key to carrying out their missions including drug interdiction.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you. I look forward to receiving progress reports on the Coast Guard's workforce assessments and the Government Accountability Office's recommendations, and I look forward to working with all of you to train and equip the people who defend our shores.

With that, the hearing record will remain open for two weeks. During that time Senators may submit questions for the record.

Upon receipt, witnesses are requested to submit their written answers to the Committee as soon as possible, but by no later than Thursday October 3.

I thank the witnesses for appearing today and this hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:13 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. TED CRUZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM TEXAS

Chairwoman Baldwin and Ranking Member Sullivan, thank you for holding today's hearing. And thank you to Admiral Lunday, Rear Admiral Burdian, Rear Admiral Little, and Ms. MacLeod for appearing today.

You cannot stop illegal drugs when you have an open border. The Biden-Harris administration and DHS Secretary Mayorkas have ignored the painful connection between their open border policies and the devastation wrought by illegally trafficked drugs on our families, communities, and country. This administration's radical policies have led to an influx of illegal aliens, drug smuggling, sex trafficking, and American lives lost.

Our Nation relies upon the Coast Guard to keep our country safe, project national power, and champion the rule of law. The men and women of the Coast Guard do this job tremendously well, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Yet because of the Biden-Harris administration's actions, and their allies in Congress, the Coast Guard finds itself in an increasingly impossible position. On the migrant and narcotics fronts alone, the Coast Guard has readily acknowledged it has been unable to interdict drugs they otherwise could have because the Coast Guard was busy catching and releasing illegal aliens instead.

Last Congress, I inserted a provision into the Coast Guard bill during committee markup to study the impacts of the Biden-Harris open border policies on the workload of the Coast Guard. But Senate Democrats, preferring ignorance to politically inconvenient facts, unilaterally stripped it from the final product.

Though this is bad enough, this Administration has also taken to expanding the Coast Guard's responsibilities without increasing resources. Most recently, in a clear sop to the environmentalist left, Biden-Harris officials at NOAA proposed senseless new whale-related rules impacting the waters from South Texas to Northern Maine that, in addition to curtailing most oil and gas development, would see the Coast Guard play traffic cop for boats going faster than 11.5 miles per hour.

The reality is this: while the Coast Guard does an incredibly admirable job, it works with limited resources stemming from an administration that is more concerned with advancing woke and ineffectual policies than equipping the Coast Guard with the tools and support to do dangerous and demanding jobs.

As just one example this Administration's disastrous vaccine mandate kicked coasties out of the service while the Coast Guard was struggling to meet recruitment goals. How many more tons of dangerous drugs could have been stopped from reaching our shores had the Coast Guard been adequately resourced or not had to clean up the Biden-Harris border crisis?

Unfortunately, this Administration's bad policies don't stop at our exclusive economic zone. In the Middle East, where maritime drug trafficking bankrolls Iran's malign activities, Coast Guard cutters recently interdicted advanced weapons originating from Iran bound for the Houthis in Yemen, and hundreds of kilograms of methamphetamines, heroin, and other narcotics from a dhow in the Arabian Sea.

Oftentimes, the Coast Guard and other Federal agencies are playing catch-and-release with these Iranian drug-runners. That's a horrible idea since these vessels face no consequence other than losing their cargo. I have put forward language for the upcoming Coast Guard reauthorization that empowers the Coast Guard and the Navy to respond appropriately to dhows running drugs and weapons to finance Iranian terror. There needs to be consequences since catch-and-release is a failure.

Still, there have been incremental gains and improvements in border security through the Coast Guard. In the last authorization, I secured language to provide a tethered aerostat radar system at Coast Guard Station South Padre Island at the Texas-Mexico border to combat poachers, human traffickers, and drug runners. I am proud to say that system is up and flying in South Texas today and helping to keep Americans safe and prosperous.

Similarly, my provision requiring operational data sharing between CBP and the Coast Guard is helping to streamline interdiction efforts along the southern maritime border, so that more people illegally entering the U.S. are caught.

But we still have more to accomplish. We need to end the “catch and release” approach to Middle East drug enforcement, and enact the Pay Our Coast Guard Act, which I sponsored along with Senators Cantwell, Sullivan, Baldwin, and Wicker to ensure the Coast Guard is no longer the only armed service that goes unpaid during a government shutdown.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about their important work and what they could accomplish if properly resourced.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. TAMMY DUCKWORTH TO
ADMIRAL KEVIN E. LUNDAY

QFR #8

COAST GUARD—ILLEGAL UNREPORTED & UNREGULATED FISHING (IUUF)
OPERATIONS

BACKGROUND: I would like to express my gratitude to the U.S. Coast Guard for your work in combatting Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. As you know, the global and domestic impacts of IUU fishing pose a significant security threat to the U.S. economy.

QUESTION PART-1: How is the Coast Guard planning to meet operational demands of combatting IUU fishing in the Indo-Pacific while facing current limitations with the number of available ships and an aging fleet?

Answer. Operations in the Indo-Pacific are inherently challenging as we work to reach and support remote partners and sustain our own personnel and assets across the vast region. The Coast Guard plans to continue engagement across the Indo-Pacific; resource needs to do so are reflected in the President’s Budget and our Unfunded Priorities List. The Coast Guard continues to leverage interagency and international partnerships to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing throughout the Indo-Pacific.

QUESTION PART-2: During the Coast Guard’s interruption of IUU fishing operations, to what extent do you observe those malign actors engaging in other unlawful activity concurrently?

Answer. Based on historical data and observation, the Coast Guard rarely sees other unlawful activities concurrently taking place during counter-IUU fishing operations. Additionally, Coast Guard presence often changes the behavior of both domestic and foreign fishing fleets.

QUESTION PART-3: How would you characterize the Coast Guard’s effective interoperability with allies and partners as you conduct IUU fishing operations, and what resources or authorities would provide the greatest positive impact to improve this interoperability?

Answer. The Coast Guard leverages 12 bilateral agreements throughout the INDOPACOM Area of Responsibility. In 2024, the Coast Guard executed all 12 of these agreements to assist our Pacific Island partners in combatting IUU fishing. The Coast Guard leverages DoD’s Oceania Maritime Security Initiative to conduct bilateral boardings with U.S. Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETs) embarked onboard U.S. naval vessels. Joint Coast Guard operations throughout the Indo-Pacific ensure continued interoperability with our allies to maintain rules-based order throughout the region. Continuing to enhance Coast Guard capacity and capability, through the acquisition of new cutters and aircraft, is critical to improving mission effectiveness for counter IUU fishing operations.

QFR #9

COAST GUARD LAW ENFORCEMENT/DRUG INTERDICTION DEMAND

BACKGROUND: Data shows a significant decline in U.S. Coast Guard cocaine seizures over the last three years, despite a steady flow of cocaine across the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean AORs.

QUESTION PART-1: Is there a way in which the Coast Guard could increase its Law Enforcement presence in known drug trafficking areas, such as the use of Law Enforcement Detachments with Title 14 authority onboard allied vessels, without diverting Coast Guard ships away from the maritime migration flow?

Answer. In FY 2024, LEDETs conducted three deployments aboard U.S. Navy and eight deployments aboard Allied surface assets. Planned LEDET deployments in FY 2025 are expected to maintain this level of commitment.

QUESTION PART-2: What additional resources could the Coast Guard utilize to meet the Service's Law Enforcement/Drug Interdiction operational demand?

Answer. The best way to bolster the Coast Guard's counter-drug capacity is to support ongoing fleet recapitalization efforts, which will enable force packages consisting of major cutters, with a deployable Airborne Use of Force capable rotary-wing aircraft and onboard tactical intelligence capabilities.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. ROGER WICKER TO
ADMIRAL KEVIN E. LUNDAY

QFR #14

(U) COAST GUARD DRUG INTERDICTION IN EASTERN PACIFIC
& WESTERN CARIBBEAN

BACKGROUND: (U) Because of the vast increase of illegal maritime migration, the Coast Guard has been forced to focus resources on migrant interdiction at the expense of other missions.

QUESTION PART-1: (U) How has this increase of migration impacted your readiness and deterrence efforts in other places, such as working to stop the drug flow in the Eastern Pacific and Western Caribbean?

Answer.(U) In August 2022, in response to a significant increase in the levels of irregular maritime migration in the Caribbean region, DHS elevated Operation Vigilant Sentry from Phase 1a to Phase 1b. At this time, the Coast Guard surged assets and personnel to deter and prevent a maritime mass migration amid the ongoing civil unrest in Haiti and deteriorating conditions in Cuba. While the Coast Guard strategically reallocates personnel and resources to these efforts, missions such as drug interdiction will continue to be impacted.

QUESTION PART-2: (U) In the last year, what percentage of illegal narcotics bound for the U.S. actually made it ashore?

Answer. (U//FOUO) The Coast Guard estimates roughly 82 percent of the documented 2,655 metric tons of cocaine moving towards the United States across all vectors was not intercepted and thus potentially available to cross the U.S. border in Fiscal Year 2023. The Service cannot verify the amount that actually made it ashore. (U//FOUO)

QUESTION PART-3: (U) Is that more or less than it was five years ago?

Answer. (U//FOUO) The Coast Guard is unable to verify the amount of illegal narcotics that actually made it to shore in 2019. The estimates for the amount of cocaine available to cross into the United States remained consistent at 82 percent. (U//FOUO)

QUESTION PART-4: (U) What resources does the Coast Guard need to stop more of the illicit flow of drugs and migrants?

Answer. (U) The best way to bolster the Coast Guard's counter-drug capacity is to support ongoing fleet recapitalization efforts.

QUESTION PART-5: (U) How can Congress support the Coast Guard to carry out these statutory missions?

Answer. (U) The Coast Guard remains responsive to all maritime threats. However, the Service needs investment and funding to sustain vital operations, modernize aging assets, and overcome shore maintenance deficiencies and personnel shortfalls. The Coast Guard's annual budget is \$12.3 billion—that equates to about 1.4 percent of the DoD budget or 6 percent of the Navy budget. With all of the value that the Coast Guard provides to the Nation, that is a tremendous return on investment for the taxpayer.

QFR #15

U.S. COAST GUARD & PARTNER NATION COOPERATION IN EASTERN
PACIFIC & WESTERN CARIBBEAN FOR DRUG INTERDICTION

BACKGROUND: These questions are regarding the U.S. Coast Guard's Partnerships with countries bordering the Eastern Pacific/Western Caribbean and how these partnerships impact drug interdiction in the region.

QUESTION PART-1: How important are the relationships and agreements the U.S. Coast Guard has with partner nations in the region?

Answer. The relationships and agreements that the U.S. Coast Guard has with partner nations to counter the flow of illicit drugs are critical to our ability to address mission demands in the Eastern Pacific and Western Caribbean region. The Coast Guard maintains over 40 country-specific counter-drug agreements, covering a range of subjects from shiprider procedures to overflight of national airspace. The Coast Guard's network of multilateral and bilateral agreements are unlike those of any other armed service or government agency.

These agreements increase the operational reach of U.S. assets and support integration with our international partners, enabling them to enforce their laws on vessels subject to their jurisdiction. These agreements are critical to supporting our national security objectives.

QUESTION PART-2: Do these relationships and agreements help the Coast Guard better understand where the drugs are coming from and where they are headed?

Answer. Yes, the relationships between the U.S. Coast Guard and partner nations in the region help the information flow to better understand illicit drug activities. The depth and continuity of relationships with countries where the Coast Guard has permanently assigned members (liaison, attaché, etc.), help foster more collaboration and joint efforts to counter illicit drug activities. Information sharing agreements with partner nations also help identify specific drug movements in the region allowing for better targeting and interdiction by Coast Guard or partner assets.

QUESTION PART-3: Would the Coast Guard's partners in the region benefit from more Coast Guard and SOUTHCOM resources in theater?

Answer. The Coast Guard footprint strengthens and develops partner nation capabilities. Bilateral agreements greatly increase the operational reach of U.S. assets and also support integration with our international partners by providing support to enable their assets to better patrol and respond to maritime threats in their sovereign waters. During key leader engagements throughout the region, our partners have expressed a desire for more U.S. Coast Guard, SOUTHCOM, and other U.S. resources and partnership. If the United States does not foster relationships, these countries will have limited choices and may turn to our rivals and adversaries for support.

QUESTION PART-4: How has the U.S. Coast Guard's relationships with those countries helped stem the flow of drugs?

Answer. The Coast Guard contributes aircraft, cutters, and personnel for the detection and monitoring of illicit drugs. The strong relationships fostered by the Coast Guard enable information sharing and facilitate operations and data analysis critical for targeting the primary flow of illicit traffic, directly degrading TCO networks. The expertise obtained by partner nations facilitates independent operations and coordination with JIATF-S for counter-drug operations at sea without the need for Coast Guard personnel or assets. In FY 2023, partner nations carried out approximately 80 percent of JIATF-S interdictions. Coast Guard presence and support in the region has enabled essential training, modeling, and process improvements that empower partner nations to battle TCOs.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN TO
ADMIRAL KEVIN E. LUNDAY

QFR #17

COAST GUARD ICEBREAKER ACQUISITION/CONSTRUCTION

BACKGROUND: The Coast Guard's law enforcement mission on the Great Lakes can only be carried out with icebreakers during the winter months, protecting our northern border. The Coast Guard requested \$55 million in FY24 to start the construction process on a new heavy icebreaker for the Great Lakes yet received only \$20 million.

The Coast Guard's icebreaking mission, whether in the Arctic, Antarctic or on the Great Lakes is suffering. The HEALY was sent back to Seattle after a casualty leaving the Arctic uncovered. The 40-year-old 140-foot icebreaking tugs are suffering astounding failure rates causing significant impacts to our winter supply chain on the Great Lakes.

QUESTION PART-1: How is the lack of funding impacting the acquisition timeline for this critical new multi-mission asset, the heavy Great Lakes Icebreaker?

Answer. The reduction from the \$55 million requested in the FY 2024 President's Budget to the \$20 million provided for the Great Lakes Icebreaker in the FY 2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act partially funds the Analyze/Select phase of

the acquisition. The appropriated funds are sufficient to initiate that phase, but the Service will need the balance of the requested \$55 million in order to complete the Analyze/Select phase.

QUESTION PART-2: Why did the Coast Guard not ask for funding for the new heavy Great Lakes Icebreaker in the FY25 Presidents Budget?

Answer. The timing of the three-year process to build the FY 2025 President's Budget request and the delayed enactment of the FY 2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act did not afford the Coast Guard any flexibility to adjust for the reduction below the amount included in the FY 2024 President's Budget. After nearly two-and-a-half years of development, the FY 2025 President's Budget was transmitted to Congress on March 11, 2024; the FY 2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act was signed into law on March 23, 2024.

QUESTION PART-3: What can this committee do to help expedite icebreaker construction now?

Answer. Two actions could help expedite icebreaker construction. First, Congress could provide the remaining \$35 million dollars that is needed to complete the Analyze/Select phase—without additional funding, the Coast Guard expects to exhaust available funding in the early part of FY 2026. Additionally, Congress could fund the \$25 million request on the Coast Guard's FY 2025 Unfunded Priorities List for Long-Lead Time Material. This would expedite icebreaker construction; however, the Service cannot begin construction until after the Analyze/Select phase is complete.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. MARIA CANTWELL TO
JO-ANN F. BURDIAN, RADM, USCG

Question 1. Over the past decade, the known flow of cocaine through the maritime environment has more than doubled, while Coast Guard removals have remained flat. At the same time that we have more cocaine entering America, this cocaine is now often being cut with fentanyl and turned into a far deadlier narcotic.

a. How can the Coast Guard and JIATFS better deter, interdict, and stop this surging flow of cocaine coming into the United States?

Answer. The greatest operational challenge JIATFS faces in deterring and interdicting the surging flow of cocaine is the availability of U.S. assets. To better deter and stop these shipments, we need to increase the number of maritime and air platforms assigned to our Detection and Monitoring (D&M) missions. Enhancing intelligence-sharing and fostering deeper partnerships with our Latin American and Caribbean allies is also essential, as over 80 percent of JIATFS interdictions are conducted by partner nations. Additionally, modernizing our infrastructure—particularly the consolidation into a single Command and Control Facility (C2F)—will significantly improve our coordination and operational effectiveness.

b. If Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATFS) was assigned additional Coast Guard ships, planes, and other assets, could your team boost interdiction rates? Please describe.

Answer. Yes, additional ships, planes, and assets would significantly increase JIATFS's interdiction rates. For each additional force package, which includes a long-range surface asset, an over-the-horizon interceptor, and a maritime patrol aircraft, we can disrupt approximately 50 metric tons of cocaine per year. These assets would allow us to cover more of the 42 million square mile Joint Operating Area (JOA), detect more targets, and support U.S. law enforcement agencies and partner nations in conducting more interdictions.

c. Please provide a detailed breakdown of how many additional assets, such as ships, planes, and other assets, or asset hours, that JIATFS could effectively employ to prosecute the large volume of tactical intelligence coming into the taskforce?

Answer. JIATFS could immediately employ additional Coast Guard cutters and Navy ships with embarked Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETs) and Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA). Based on FY24 Global Force Management (GFM) requirements and allocations, JIATFS requires 5,475 ship days annually to effectively meet operational demand, yet only 1,825 ship days were allocated. Similarly, we requested 12,700 hours for Customs and Border Protection (CBP) maritime patrol aircraft, but only 5,500 hours were allocated. These shortages limit our ability to fully act on the large volume of tactical intelligence we receive. Additional surface assets and MPA would allow us to significantly increase interdiction rates and reduce the flow of cocaine toward U.S. shores.

d. What other actions does the Federal government need take to increase narcotic interdiction rates?

Answer. The most impactful action the Federal government can take is to increase the number of U.S. surface and air assets available for interdiction operations in the JIATFS region. Enhancing intelligence-sharing agreements with partner nations and improving real-time data exchange will allow for more effective interdictions. Additionally, a second Ship Special Mission (SSM) would also expand our capacity to support partner nations in conducting interdictions on the high seas, further reducing the volume of cocaine reaching U.S. shores.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. TAMMY DUCKWORTH TO
JO-ANN F. BURDIAN, RADM, USCG

Increasing Law Enforcement Presence Despite Competing CG Migrant Demands

Data shows a significant decline in U.S. Coast Guard cocaine seizures over the last three years, despite a steady flow of cocaine across the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean AORs.

Question 1. Is there a way in which the U.S. Coast Guard could increase its Law Enforcement presence in known drug trafficking areas, such as the use of Law Enforcement Detachments with Title 14 authority onboard allied vessels, without diverting U.S. Coast Guard ships away from the maritime migration flow?

Answer. Yes, one way to increase U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement presence in known drug trafficking areas without diverting Coast Guard ships from the maritime migration mission is through the use of LEDETs. These teams can embark on allied and Partner Nation vessels with appropriate shiprider agreements, leveraging their authority under Title 14 to conduct interdictions. This approach has proven effective and allows us to multiply our law enforcement presence by utilizing partner nation platforms in areas where trafficking is heaviest.

Question 2. What additional resources or authorities could be utilized by JIATFS to meet this operational demand?

Answer. To meet the growing operational demand, additional resources are essential. First, increasing the availability of LEDETs, surface assets, and maritime patrol aircraft would significantly enhance JIATFS's capacity to detect and monitor illicit drug shipments. These resources are critical for maintaining a strong presence across the vast area of operations.

Additionally, continued funding for the construction of a new Command and Control Facility (C2F) is crucial to improving real-time intelligence sharing and operational coordination with our interagency and international partners. Furthermore, funding for military family housing in Key West would directly support the JIATFS team, ensuring that we can retain top talent and maintain our operational tempo.

In terms of authorities, we appreciate Congress' efforts to expand JIATFS authority to conduct D&M of the transit of illegal drugs regardless of their destination within the JOA, as provided in the SASC's FY25 NDAA section 351. This authority would enable JIATFS to intercept drugs that are not only bound for the United States but also for other regions, giving us a broader reach to disrupt the global drug trade.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. TED CRUZ TO
JO-ANN F. BURDIAN, RADM, USCG

Drug Trafficking

Question 1. What does the Coast Guard need to increase the amount of intelligence on drug trafficking that it is able to act on?

Answer. JIATFS respectfully defers to the U.S. Coast Guard to provide information on their specific intelligence needs.

Question 2. Have Joint Interagency Task Force South assets interdicted fentanyl or fentanyl precursor chemicals in the maritime environment in the past few years? If so, how much fentanyl was interdicted in comparison with other drugs?

Answer. To date, JIATFS has not intercepted finished fentanyl in the maritime domain. Fentanyl or precursor chemicals from China or India are typically trafficked into major ports in the region, not via the typical conveyances used by cocaine trafficking (go-fasts, etc.).

Nevertheless, our efforts advance investigations into criminal organizations who traffic fentanyl into the United States. According to the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces, last year, 23 percent of their designated investigations that

involved U.S. maritime interdictions in the JIATFS JOA were connected to organizations also linked to fentanyl or its precursors.

Question 3. When Joint Interagency Task Force South assets interdict criminals attempting to bring deadly narcotics into the United States, are they prosecuted in the United States? Are any simply sent back to their own country?

Answer. When JIATFS supports an interdiction of narcotics, and the interdiction is conducted by a U.S. platform (USCG or DoD with LEDET), the traffickers involved are typically prosecuted in the United States under U.S. Federal law. If a partner nation conducts the interdiction using its own assets, those individuals are often prosecuted in the partner nation's judicial system. While we welcome the growing involvement of partner nations in conducting interdictions, there is an advantage when the United States conducts an interdiction, as the criminals are brought to justice in the United States and we gain valuable intelligence that furthers U.S. investigations into larger transnational criminal organizations (TCO) networks.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. ROGER WICKER TO
JO-ANN F. BURDIAN, RADM, USCG

Question 1. How important are the relationships and agreements that we have with partner nations in the region? Do these relationships and agreements help you to better understand where the drugs are coming from and where they are headed?

Answer. The relationships and agreements with our partner nations are critical to the success of JIATFS operations. The U.S. benefits most from U.S.-led interdictions, as they result in prosecutions within the U.S. legal system, leading to the dismantling of TCOs. Increased U.S. assets in the region would bolster these efforts, enabling us to act on intelligence more quickly and intercept more shipments before they reach U.S. shores.

However, the close partnerships we have with Latin American and Caribbean nations significantly enhance our ability to track the flow of drugs. These relationships provide invaluable insights into drug trafficking routes and allow us to monitor, track, and interdict narcotics before they reach U.S. shores. Additionally, bilateral agreements with countries like Colombia, Peru, and Panama enable seamless cooperation and law enforcement actions, further enhancing our understanding of the source and transit zones of these narcotics.

Question 2. Would your partners in the region benefit from more Coast Guard and SOUTHCOM resources in theater?

Answer. Yes. Our partner nations rely heavily on the resources and support provided by the U.S. Coast Guard and SOUTHCOM to conduct effective interdictions. Increased availability of U.S. assets—particularly interdiction assets and LEDETs—would allow our partners to engage in more operations and interdict greater quantities of cocaine. Additionally, expanded training programs and investments in their interdiction platforms would enhance their operational capabilities and further support the shared mission of disrupting TCOs. JIATFS can do more . . . with more.

How has our relationships with those countries helped stem the flow of drugs?

Answer. Our relationships with partner nations have been instrumental in stemming the flow of drugs. Joint exercises and operations have led to increased interoperability and experience, positively impacting day-to-day operations. Over 80 percent of JIATFS interdictions are now conducted by partner nations, demonstrating the critical role they play in countering drug trafficking. These partnerships allow us to disrupt shipments at multiple points along the supply chain, significantly reducing the volume of drugs entering the United States.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. DAN SULLIVAN TO
JO-ANN F. BURDIAN, RADM, USCG

Unmanned Systems

Question 1. How do JIATF South & JIATF-West employ unmanned systems? Does JIATFS have something like a Task Force 59?

Answer. JIATFS employs unmanned systems through partnerships with various force providers and interagency collaborations. We leverage unmanned aerial systems like the CBP MQ-9 Predator, as well as smaller drones, to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in support of our detection and monitoring missions. While we do not have a dedicated entity like Task Force 59, we are working closely with U.S. Navy 4th Fleet to incorporate unmanned technologies as part of their Hybrid Fleet concept, which will further strengthen our maritime and

air domain awareness across our vast area of operations. Finally, JIATFS continues to prioritize efforts to optimize software, sensors, and unmanned systems to rapidly improve operational effectiveness. By integrating these technologies, we are increasing our ability to detect and monitor drug trafficking activities across the vast region we cover.

IUU Fishing

Question 1. Is there an overlap of efforts, assets, and resources used in the counterdrug mission that could also be used to help combat IUU fishing?

Answer. There is some overlap in terms of the intelligence-sharing mechanisms and assets used for both the counterdrug mission and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. JIATFS authorities are specifically for the D&M of narcotics transiting via air and maritime domains. However, during the course of our counter-narcotics D&M missions, our maritime patrol aircraft and surface assets may detect vessels engaged in IUU fishing. In such cases, we follow established IUU fishing business rules with the U.S. Coast Guard, which allow us to pass any incidental intelligence gathered during our operations to the appropriate organizations with IUU fishing authority.

While there is overlap in these capabilities, the primary focus of JIATFS remains on the counterdrug mission. Diverting assets to address IUU fishing would require additional resources to avoid compromising our effectiveness in interdicting narcotics. Expanding our authority or creating a dedicated JIATF-like organization focused on IUU fishing may provide a more structured and efficient approach to combating these activities.

Would additional authorities without additional resources be helpful?

Answer. The U.S. Coast Guard is the lead Federal agency for conducting counter-IUU fishing operations, and many of the same approaches—such as intelligence fusion, detection, and monitoring—apply to both counterdrug and IUU fishing missions. However, additional authorities without corresponding resources would offer only limited benefits. The key to addressing both counterdrug and IUU fishing threats lies in increasing the availability of resources—such as surface assets and patrol aircraft—to support the expanded mission scope. Without sufficient resources, additional authorities alone would not enable JIATFS to maintain the necessary operational tempo to meet the growing challenges posed by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and illegal fishing operations.

Question 2. IF NOT, do you think a JIATF-like organization that is focused on IUU fishing instead of drug trafficking is needed?

Answer. JIATFS is recognized as the “gold standard” in interagency cooperation, a model that could enhance many different missions. Given the USCG’s status as the lead Federal agency to counter-IUU fishing, JIATFS respectfully defers to the USCG on the utility of a JIATF-like organization focused on this activity.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. MARIA CANTWELL TO RADM BOB LITTLE

Question 1. You stated that Joint Interagency Task Force-West (JIATF-W) has “had a significant reduction in capacity” and has had to evolve “as an organization as we have had to reassess where our priorities.” Please specifically identify what capacity has been reduced, how JIATF-W’s priorities have changed as a result, and what effect this has had on JIATF-W’s ability to identify and interdict the flow of fentanyl and fentanyl precursor chemicals?

Answer. The FY19 Defense-Wide Review (DWR) directed the Department to “deactivate JIATF-W operations center/systems” and transfer residual functions to USINDOPACOM and USNORTHCOM no later than FY 2023. In April 2022, the Secretary of Defense approved the decision to retain JIATF-W, but as a smaller, more focused organization that would concentrate on programs and activities directly supporting counterdrug and counter transnational organized crime operations. In accordance with the Secretary’s decision, the Task Force’s budget and manpower was reduced.

In response to the reduced funding, JIATF-W formed a Mission Refinement Working Group to determine how best to structure the organization while maximizing efficiencies and more effectively manage our available resources. Based on the Working Group findings, JIATF-W reorganized into a Cross Functional Team (CFT) structure integrating intelligence and operations functions across four geographical regions (Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania) to optimize mission effectiveness. JIATF-W’s four separate CFTs leverage our diverse expertise and perspectives to regionally integrate intelligence, planning, and oper-

ational functions. Each CFT is supported by the Operations Support Directorate who provides centralized planning, evaluation, and coordination. JIATF-W's Intelligence Directorate established a Fusion Cell and a Targeting Cell. The Fusion Cell weaves the CFT's regional threat pictures into the overarching strategic intelligence picture while the Targeting Cell contributes to the intelligence fusion process by diving into specific targets to build actionable intelligence products for use by U.S. law enforcement and/or other U.S. partners.

In 2023, we updated our Lines of Effort (LOE) to better align with new USINDOPACOM and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counter-narcotics and Stabilization Policy priorities. JIATF-W's four specific Lines of Effort are:

LOE 1: Provide Intelligence Analysis to U.S. LEAs and partners in support of Investigations and Operations

LOE 2: Identify, Monitor, and Target Threat Networks associated with Precursor Chemicals and Pharmaceutical Equipment from the Indo-Pacific to the Western Hemisphere

LOE 3: Identify, Monitor, and Target Threat Networks associated with Mexican drug trafficking organizations operating in the Indo-Pacific

LOE 4: Strengthen Allies and Partners

JIATF-W's highest priority remains countering the fentanyl threat to the homeland which spans across all four LOEs. The Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2024, provided JIATF-W with a one-time \$10 million increase in counterdrug funding to counter the smuggling of chemical precursors from Asia into the Western Hemisphere.

With the funding, JIATF-W increased its intelligence capabilities by procuring improved technology and hiring additional contracted intelligence analysts to improve the capacity to conduct deeper supply chain analysis. This enabled the production of more intelligence on illicit companies and their fentanyl precursor shipments. The current draft of the Fiscal Year 2025 House defense appropriation has a similar addition of four million dollars for the same purpose.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. TAMMY DUCKWORTH TO
RADM BOB LITTLE

International Coordination

Members from my staff had the pleasure of visiting JIATF-W earlier this year and I'm grateful for you hosting them to answer questions regarding how JIATF-W is working with our international and interagency partners to combat the flow of illicit narcotics and IUU fishing in the Indo-Pacific.

Question 1. If provided with the necessary resources, can you identify new or existing partners in the Indo-Pacific that JIATF-W could engage to strengthen regional cooperation and advance these missions, especially where opportunity may be untapped?

Answer. The U.S. Coast Guard is the lead Federal agency for conducting counter-IUU fishing operations. JIATF-W is funded from counterdrug operations and operates under counterdrug authorities.

USINDOPACOM's FY25 unfunded priority list has requested 4.2 million dollars in non-counter narcotics funds for JIATF-West to provide the capacity to support our regional partners' priority needs by taking a more comprehensive approach to counter illicit and malign activity. As this money would not be limited to only counterdrug operations, we would be able to work with additional partners to illuminate criminal activity such as financial crimes and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF).

Additional engagement would be particularly helpful in Oceania and support cooperation with the Pacific Islands countries. Moreover, JIATF-W could expand its limited work with the Pacific Islands Forum's Fisheries Agency supporting the 17 member states as they sustainably manage and enforce their fishing resources. The group also works with the Oceania Customs Organization, the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, and the Pacific Immigration Development Community to jointly combat transnational organized crime.

Question 2. How would you characterize the U.S. Coast Guard's effective interoperability with allies and partners as you conduct IUU fishing and counter-narcotics operations, and what resources or authorities would provide the greatest positive impact to improve this interoperability?

Answer. The U.S. Coast Guard is best postured to respond to this question.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. TED CRUZ TO
RADM BOB LITTLE

Drug Trafficking

Question 1. It has been well documented that fentanyl precursors originating in China are shipped to Mexico, where illicit fentanyl is being produced. As illicit fentanyl trafficking increases along the land border, what is Joint Interagency Task Force West doing to improve capabilities to locate, detect, and interdict fentanyl and fentanyl precursors at sea?

Answer. Joint Interagency Task Force West (JIATF-W) does not have strong indications that finished fentanyl is trafficked via the maritime as a primary means of conveyance; however, precursor chemicals used to produce other synthetic opioids, such as methamphetamine, are often shipped via maritime cargo and then diverted for illicit use after arrival in ports. To address this threat, JIATF-W provides intelligence analysis to U.S. law enforcement agencies to help identify, monitor, and target threat networks associated with these shipments.

JIATF-W's highest priority remains countering the fentanyl threat to the homeland. The Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2024, provided JIATF-W with a one-time \$10 million increase in counterdrug funding to counter the smuggling of chemical precursors from Asia into the Western Hemisphere. With the funding JIATF-W increased its intelligence capabilities by procuring improved technology and hiring additional contracted intelligence analysts to improve the capacity to conduct deeper supply chain analysis. This enabled the production of more intelligence on illicit companies and fentanyl precursors.

The current draft of the Fiscal Year 2025 House defense appropriation has a similar addition of \$4 million dollars for the same purpose which would allow us to continue many of these efforts.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. DAN SULLIVAN TO
RADM BOB LITTLE

Unmanned Systems

Question 1. How do JIATF-South & JIATF-West employ unmanned systems? Does JIATF-S have something like a Task Force 59?

Answer. JIATF-W does not have assigned ships and aircraft to include unmanned systems. However, JIATF-W submits collection requirements to USINDOPACOM, which may use a variety of DoD assets to fulfill valid requirements. Additionally, through support to U.S. law enforcement, JIATF-W helps coordinate end-game operations that may include USCG and DoD assets.

IUU Fishing

Question 1. Is there an overlap of efforts, assets, and resources used in the counterdrug mission that could also be used to help combat IUU fishing? Would additional authorities without additional resources be helpful?

Answer. Through USINDOPACOM, JIATF-W has the authorities it requires to help combat IUU fishing as evidenced by its leadership of the USINDOPACOM-funded Blue Pacific Cooperative initiative which aims to expand maritime domain awareness and information sharing capabilities in support of counter IUUF operations for the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA).

The FFA is primarily focused on countering IUUF, but in November 2023 it partnered with the Oceania Customs Organization, Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP) and the Pacific Immigration Development Community to jointly combat transnational organized crime. According to the PICP, this new partnership formed in response to the rising threats of drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other transnational crimes that exploit the vulnerabilities of the region.

In September 2024, JIATF-W supported a U.S. Coast Guard-led operation in Palau. This operation focused on enhancing maritime domain awareness and Palau's ability to identify and act on illicit maritime activity in their sovereign waters. JIATF-W also supported a similar operation in Fiji that resulted in a maritime drug seizure. The Pacific Island's new focus on transnational organized crime uniquely positions JIATF-W to expand its support to the PICP and other regional partners.

To this end, USINDOPACOM's FY25 unfunded priority list has requested 4.2 million dollars in non-CN funds for JIATF-West which would provide the capacity to support our regional partners' priority needs by taking a more comprehensive approach to counter illicit and malign activity. As this money would not be limited to only counter narcotics operations, we would be able to work with additional partners

to illuminate criminal activity such as financial crimes, human trafficking, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

Question 2. IF NOT, do you think a JIATF-like organization that is focused on IUU fishing instead of drug trafficking is needed?

Answer. A JIATF-like organization that supports U.S. and regional law enforcement in addressing a wider range of transnational crimes and malign influences could more effectively illuminate interconnected criminal enterprises and bolster regional security. This would also be a more efficient application of resources, providing better integration of whole of government efforts to strengthen regional security. We defer to the Department of Defense and Congress regarding the need to establish such an organization.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. MARIA CANTWELL TO
HEATHER MACLEOD

Question 1. GAO has done extensive work documenting the delays in Coast Guard acquisition programs, including the Coast Guard's top two acquisition priorities—the Offshore Patrol Cutter and the Polar Security Cutter. Both new cutter classes are vitally needed to help provide for the security and safety of our Nation.

a. What does the Coast Guard need to do to ensure the timeline for these critical acquisition programs does not slip further?

Answer. The Coast Guard needs to focus on achieving a stable design in accordance with GAO's shipbuilding leading practices (GAO-24-105503). As we have previously reported, the shipbuilders for the Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) and the Polar Security Cutter (PSC) have yet to stabilize their design, which has contributed to schedule delays and cost growth for both programs (GAO-23-105805, GAO-23-105949). For example, the OPC program began ship construction without a matured critical technology, which led to redesign of portions of the ship and contributed to delays of the lead ship by almost four years. The PSC program is more than four years late delivering a capability because designing the polar icebreaker has taken much longer than planned. A stable design will help ensure the shipbuilders and the Coast Guard have the knowledge needed to support timely, predictable outcomes for both programs.

b. How can the Coast Guard expedite the delivery of these and other new assets to ensure they are operational and executing missions as soon as possible?

Answer. In addition to ensuring a design is sufficiently stable as outlined above, the Coast Guard needs to work with the shipbuilders to set realistic schedules. We previously reported that the Coast Guard adopted unrealistic schedules from the outset of both the OPC and PSC programs. The programs' schedule challenges have been exacerbated by a lack of reliable schedule data from the shipbuilders that could be used to anchor projections of remaining work to complete the ships. For example, the PSC program can use the knowledge gained from building up to eight sections (of 85 on the total ship) and apply it to the planned production time to create more realistic schedules for each PSC. Additionally, as we found in May 2024, commercial ship buyers and builders use leading design practices that enable shorter, predictable cycles for designing and delivering new ships (GAO-24-105503). These practices include leveraging existing ship designs, prioritizing timely vendor decisions, and using ship design tools to shorten cycle time. By leveraging such practices, the Coast Guard could achieve more consistent, predictable outcomes and help expedite delivery for its shipbuilding programs.

c. How are these delays specifically impacting Coast Guard mission performance?

Answer. In the absence of new cutters, the Coast Guard is relying on its aged fleet of existing ships. While these ships have generally maintained operations, continued use increases the risk they will fail before they are replaced. For example, the Coast Guard is annually accomplishing its Antarctic mission with its existing heavy polar icebreaker, the Polar Star, which is over 47 years old and well beyond its 30-year service life. However, there is no backup if the Polar Star becomes inoperable before PSCs are delivered.

Question 2. The Coast Guard is currently short 10 percent of its enlisted workforce. As a result, 10 cutters were removed from service this year, and there is now reduced staffing at numerous boat stations nationwide. In 2025, the Service plans to lay up another 5 ships.

a. With all the Coast Guard's workforce and retention challenges, what does the Coast Guard need to do to increase recruitment, retention, and become a more competitive employer?

Answer. We have made more than 29 recommendations since 2022 which relate to these issues, including workforce issues involving critical areas of expertise such as cybersecurity and marine inspections, and housing challenges that can affect the Coast Guard's workforce.² The Coast Guard needs to fully implement these recommendations in a timely manner, which will help position the it to address workforce challenges. Competition with higher paying jobs in the private sector, limited opportunities for promotion, and long work hours have made it challenging for the Coast Guard to recruit personnel. While some challenges, such as higher paying jobs in the private sector, are largely outside its control,³ the Coast Guard needs to address quality-of-life factors within its authority that affect its ability to retain personnel. This includes access to childcare,⁴ health care,⁵ housing,⁶ and education.⁷ For example:

- In September 2022, we made six recommendations aimed at improving the Coast Guard's workforce planning process for cybersecurity personnel, including assessing needs, collecting data, and developing a strategy and metrics that could better inform efforts to recruit these personnel.⁸
- In April 2023, we made six recommendations that the Coast Guard, among other things, obtain, share, and monitor several types of data, including information on health care access and the reasons for medical provider recruitment and retention challenges.⁹
- In February 2024, we made three recommendations that the Coast Guard collect and use service-wide housing feedback and assess 10 DOD housing authorities for potential benefits. If implemented, these actions could help with the Coast Guard's retention of service members and competitiveness as an employer and improve awareness of the extent of challenges experienced by service members that utilize either government-owned or private sector housing, which could affect morale and retention.¹⁰

b. What resources does the Coast Guard need to boost recruitment and retention?

Answer. The Coast Guard needs to fully assess its workforce needs in a timely, comprehensive manner, including requesting and deploying adequate resources to do so. Such assessments could help inform its recruiting goals. As of March 2023, the service reported completing workforce requirement determinations for 15 percent of its units. In May 2023 we testified regarding 29 related recommendations, including to improve workforce planning processes and data monitoring and collection, of which 24 remain open that could affect specific resources.¹¹ For example, while the Coast Guard says that determining actual workforce needs is a priority, as of September 2024 the service had not adequately staffed the offices responsible for assessing actual workforce needs.¹²

Nevertheless, in October 2024, Coast Guard officials reported the service exceeded its FY 2024 recruitment goals for enlisted and reserve personnel. The number of enlisted recruits was 4,422 (with a goal of 4,200); reserve recruits totaled 737 (with

² GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, GAO-23-106750 (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

³ Like other military departments, the Coast Guard is authorized to pay special bonus or incentive pay for certain professional expertise, such as for aviation officers and officers in health professions. 37 U.S.C. §§ 334, 335.

⁴ GAO, *Military Child Care: Coast Guard is Taking Steps to Increase Access for Families*, GAO-22-105262 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2022).

⁵ GAO, *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, GAO-23-105574 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2023).

⁶ GAO, *Coast Guard: Better Feedback Collection and Information Could Enhance Housing Program*, GAO-24-106388 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2024).

⁷ GAO, *K-12 Education: U.S. Military Families Generally Have the Same Schooling Options as Other Families and Consider Multiple Factors When Selecting Schools*, GAO-21-80 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 4, 2021).

⁸ GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, GAO-22-105208 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022).

⁹ GAO, *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, GAO-23-105574 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2023).

¹⁰ GAO, *Coast Guard: Better Feedback Collection and Information Could Enhance Housing Program*, GAO-24-106388 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2024). In addition, in March 2023 we reported on recruitment and retention challenges for active-duty personnel facing the Department of Defense (DOD). See GAO, *National Security Snapshot: DOD Active-Duty Recruitment and Retention Challenges*, GAO-23-106551 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2023).

¹¹ GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, GAO-23-106750 (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

¹² We have two additional ongoing audits addressing Coast Guard recruitment and retention efforts that are planned for issuance in Spring 2025.

a goal of 725). However, our work has found that the Coast Guard has a culture of “making do” with the resources it has, which makes it difficult to determine the resources needed to boost recruitment and retention. For example, in 2019 we found that Coast Guard budget requests did not provide accurate information about its needs.¹³ Without such information about the Coast Guard’s realistic budgetary needs, Congress will lack critical information that could help prioritize funding. We have previously reported on Coast Guard resource shortfalls and incomplete workforce planning for its drug interdiction mission, such as its aviation workforce and specialized forces. We continue to believe that budget transparency will aid decision-makers and the Coast Guard in making better trade-off decisions.

RESPONSE TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. TED CRUZ TO
HEATHER MACLEOD

Drug Trafficking

Your statement notes that the Coast Guard has not met its cocaine interdiction target in a decade.

Question 1. What major resources or acquisitions are necessary for the Coast Guard to improve in this area?

Answer. For its drug interdiction mission, the Coast Guard relies on its vessels and aircraft in a layered approach to address the transport of illicit drugs from the source zone, through maritime corridors off Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, and into the United States. According to the Coast Guard, this approach confronts the threat beyond U.S. land borders where traffickers are most exposed and drugs are most vulnerable to interdiction by law enforcement assets.

However, our work has shown that asset readiness and availability challenges have affected the Coast Guard’s ability to meet these drug interdiction mission demands. These challenges include (1) declining readiness of its vessels and aircraft and (2) acquisition associated delays in replacing them. We have made several recommendations for the Coast Guard to better support these efforts. For example, certain Coast Guard assets have been in a state of decline for decades.¹⁴

Our work has also found that the Coast Guard’s declining asset readiness is exacerbated by persistent challenges it faces managing its planned \$40 billion acquisition programs to modernize its vessels and aircraft. These challenges include:

- Capability gaps from schedule delays. Delays experienced by the Coast Guard’s highest priority program—the Offshore Patrol Cutters—will exacerbate capability gaps.¹⁵ The Coast Guard plans to replace the aging Medium Endurance Cutters with Offshore Patrol Cutters. The Commandant testified in July 2024 that Offshore Patrol Cutters are to be essential assets for Coast Guard’s drug interdiction mission.¹⁶ However, in May 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard has delayed delivery of the first Offshore Patrol Cutter by 4 years, from Fiscal Year 2021 to 2025.¹⁷ In June 2023, we reported that given the delays in delivery of the Offshore Patrol Cutters, the Coast Guard projects to have a reduction in asset availability—or a reduction in the number of cutters available for operations—starting in 2024 and through 2039.
- Affordability concerns and difficult tradeoff decisions. As we reported in June 2024, the Coast Guard will have to make difficult decisions to address the af-

¹³GAO, *Coast Guard Shore Infrastructure: Applying Leading Practices Could Help Better Manage Project Backlogs of at least \$2.6 Billion*, GAO-19-82 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 21, 2019).

¹⁴GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design*, GAO-23-105805 (Washington, D.C.: June 20, 2023) and *Coast Guard: Opportunities Exist to Reduce Risk for the Offshore Patrol Cutter Program*, GAO-21-9 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2020). In our June 2023 report, we also reiterated that eight of the recommendations we made in the October 2020 report to improve the program continued to have merit. As of August 2024, eight of the 13 recommendations in these two reports were not implemented.

¹⁵Offshore Patrol Cutters generally conduct the same range of missions as Medium Endurance Cutters, such as conducting search and rescue and interdicting drugs and migrants. Designed for long-distance transit, extended on-scene presence, and operations with deployable aircraft and small boats, these cutters are intended to provide offshore presence for the Coast Guard’s cutter fleet.

¹⁶Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, *From Drug Interdictions in the Caribbean to National Security Patrols in the Arctic: Examining U.S. Coast Guard’s Role in Securing the Homeland*, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 24, 2024.

¹⁷GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Opportunities Exist to Improve Shipbuilding Outcomes*, GAO-24-107488 (Washington, D.C.: May 7, 2024).

fordability concerns surrounding its acquisition portfolio.¹⁸ These concerns affect how the Coast Guard prioritizes spending on aging assets, including those currently performing the drug interdiction mission. Specifically, for over a decade and most recently in 2024, we have reported that the Coast Guard's short-term budget decisions have resulted in a buildup of near-term unaffordable acquisitions that have continued to put pressure on available resources.¹⁹ In particular, we reported that the Coast Guard made short-term budget decisions that obscure the tradeoffs needed to balance the long-term affordability of the portfolio. To that end, the Coast Guard has yet to produce a long-term acquisitions plan, which Congress directed them to do nearly 10 years ago.²⁰

Question 2. In what ways do the Coast Guard's workforce and retention challenges impact its counter-drug mission? Is the Coast Guard making progress towards meeting its recruiting and retention goals?

Answer. In October 2024, Coast Guard officials reported the service exceeded its Fiscal Year 2024 recruitment goals for enlisted and reserve personnel. The number of enlisted recruits was 4,422 (with a goal of 4,200); reserve recruits totaled 737 (with a goal of 725). We have two additional ongoing audits addressing Coast Guard recruitment and retention efforts that are planned for issuance in Spring 2025.

Our work has shown that staffing shortfalls have affected the Coast Guard's ability to meet its mission needs, including for drug interdiction. Since October 2023, the Coast Guard has reported a nearly 10 percent shortfall in its enlisted personnel, due in part to having missed its recruiting targets in recent years with the exception of 2024, prompting it to reduce operational activities. In response, the Coast Guard has implemented plans to take several cutters out of active service, including three Medium Endurance Cutters—a mainstay of its drug interdiction efforts. Moreover, it has closed boat stations around the country due to a lack of personnel needed to staff them.

The service may miss key opportunities to tackle these issues unless it implements plans to address future workforce needs and sets goals for retaining personnel. Notably, we found the service does not have a complete picture of the workforce necessary to meet its mission demands or whether its existing mix of personnel is efficiently and effectively allocated across units. Specifically:

- In February 2020, we found that the Coast Guard had assessed a small portion of its workforce needs through the requirements determination process it began using in 2003.²¹ We recommended that the Coast Guard develop a plan for how it will meet its workforce assessment goals. As of September 2024, this recommendation remained open, and Coast Guard's last update, which was in November 2023, reported that it had assessed only 15 percent of its workforce.²²
- In April 2024, we reported on Coast Guard resource shortfalls and incomplete workforce planning for various units the service relies on to support its drug interdiction mission, such as its aviation workforce and specialized forces. Specifically, we reported that the Coast Guard had 9 percent of its authorized military aviation workforce positions vacant, as of July 2023. However, the Coast Guard had not assessed and determined necessary staffing levels and skills for a large portion of its aviation workforce, including for the workforce at its 25 air stations and its major aircraft repair facility. We recommended the Coast

¹⁸ GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisition: Actions Needed to Address Affordability Challenges*, GAO-24-107584 (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 2024).

¹⁹ GAO-24-107584; *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Portfolio Management Challenges*, GAO-18-454 (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2018); *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Limited Strategic Planning Efforts Pose Risk for Future Acquisitions*, GAO-17-747T (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2017); *Coast Guard Recapitalization: Matching Needs and Resources Continue to Strain Acquisition Efforts*, GAO-17-654T (Washington D.C.: June 7, 2017); and *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Better Information on Performance and Funding Needed to Address Shortfalls*, GAO-14-450 (Washington, D.C.: June 5, 2014).

²⁰ Since 2016, the Coast Guard has been required to develop a 20-year long-term major acquisitions plan, to be submitted to congressional committees as part of a biennial report on the status of the Coast Guard's major acquisition programs. Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-120, § 204(e), 130 Stat. 27, 35-36 (2016) (codified at 14 U.S.C. § 5103(e), formerly numbered § 2903, adding the long-term major acquisitions plan).

²¹ As of November 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it had completed workforce requirements determinations for 15 percent of its workforce. Without this information, it does not have a sound basis for prioritizing resources effectively.

²² GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Organizational Changes and Determine Workforce Needs*, GAO-20-223 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 26, 2020).

Guard assess and determine the aviation workforce levels required to meet its mission needs.²³

Growth in the Coast Guard's mission demands, and resource challenges underscore the importance of ensuring the right number of people with the right set of skills conduct its missions. In doing so, the Coast Guard will be better positioned to manage risks and inform Congress of its workforce and associated resource needs.

Gas Carrier Vessels

In January 2022, GAO released its report, entitled *Assessment of a Risk-based Approach for Conducting Gas Carrier Exams Is Needed*. That report noted that the Coast Guard has an overall shortage of approximately 400 marine inspectors.

Question 1. What role would the Coast Guard's adoption of a risk-based approach to conducting gas carrier and tank vessel compliance exams have in optimizing the Coast Guard's marine inspection workforce and addressing its marine inspection workforce challenges?

Answer. The Coast Guard's adoption of a risk-based approach to conducting gas carrier and tank vessel exams could help the Coast Guard more efficiently and effectively use its marine inspection workforce. In January 2022, we reported that from 2016 through 2020 the Coast Guard staffed the key operational field units that conduct gas carrier exams at below 70 percent of their estimated need.²⁴ The Coast Guard is required by statute to conduct gas carrier compliance exams annually,²⁵ and officials told us during our review that they complete all required exams. However, representatives from six of nine industry stakeholders told us they sometimes experienced costly delays because marine inspectors were not available.

The Coast Guard inspects other vessels based on risk but has not assessed the effects of adopting this approach for gas carriers' compliance exams. Doing so could free up resources to focus inspections on riskier vessels. We recommended the Coast Guard conduct an assessment of adopting a risk-based approach to conducting gas carrier compliance exams and take actions, as appropriate and feasible. In July 2022, the Coast Guard contracted with the National Academy of Sciences to conduct such an assessment.

In April 2024 the National Academy of Sciences published its study related to the Coast Guard's certificate of compliance program for liquefied gas carriers.²⁶ The study reported that gas carrier arrivals are expected to grow by more than 50 percent during the next decade based on current and forecasted growth in liquefied natural gas and liquefied petroleum gas exports. It also reported that unless changes are made to the compliance program requirements or size, to its management, and to the deployment of the gas-qualified marine inspection workforce, the Coast Guard will have a difficult time meeting the demand for more exams efficiently.

The National Academy of Sciences study noted that certain statutory changes would be required in order for the Coast Guard to adopt a risk-informed approach to its certificate of compliance program for liquefied natural gas carriers. It also identified several advantages and challenges related to the Coast Guard's adoption of such an approach, if authorized by statute. The study evaluated the advantages and challenges of several modifications to the compliance program and staffing allocation.

Regarding adoption of a risk-based approach to conducting gas carrier and tank vessel compliance exams, if allowed by changes to statute, the study recognized that other high-hazard industries use risk-informed approaches for their regulatory and safety oversight programs, such as the nuclear industry. Advantages included giving the Coast Guard flexibility to focus its limited resources on the highest-risk vessels, components, operations, and companies. Challenges for the Coast Guard included the collection, maintenance, and analysis of data needed to identify and assess risk factors. Additionally, the study noted that due to the marine industry's competitive nature, operator cooperation could be limited and prevent the Coast Guard from collecting the data needed to develop risk-based performance indicators.

The staffing shortage for conducting gas carrier exams that we reported on is part of a larger workforce planning challenge for the Coast Guard. In January 2022, we

²³ GAO, *Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed*, GAO-24-106374 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 9, 2024).

²⁴ See GAO, *Coast Guard: Enhancements Needed to Strengthen Marine Inspection Workforce Planning Efforts*, GAO-22-104465 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2022).

²⁵ See 46 U.S.C. § 3714(a)(1).

²⁶ See, National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. *Reforming the Coast Guard's Certificate of Compliance Program for Liquefied Gas Carriers: Promoting Efficient Implementation and Safety Effectiveness*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27803>.

reported on steps taken by the Coast Guard intended to address its marine inspection workforce needs, which could help reduce gas carrier compliance exam delays.²⁷ For example, the Coast Guard added 65 new marine inspector positions between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021 to help address a shortfall of over 400 marine inspectors. However, we also found that some of the Coast Guard initiatives were ongoing and faced implementation challenges. In that report, we made five recommendations to help improve the Coast Guard's workforce planning efforts, and the Coast Guard has implemented one of those recommendations.²⁸

In your January 2022 report entitled *Assessment of a Risk-based Approach for Conducting Gas Carrier Exams Is Needed*, you stated that "GAO analysis of Coast Guard data shows that marine inspectors identified low instances of more serious deficiencies that pose a risk to the cargo, vessel, or crew during gas carrier compliance exams." You also noted that "Coast Guard officials stated that gas carriers are generally well run."

Question 2. In light of GAO's analysis of this Coast Guard data, are gas carrier vessels a better candidate for a risk-based approach to examinations and inspections, as compared to non-gas carrier vessels of a similar size?

Answer. We have not conducted analysis of Coast Guard data to allow for comparison of deficiencies by size of vessels. However, we did report in January 2022 that Coast Guard data from Fiscal Years 2016 through 2020 showed that 29 percent (238 of 831) of examined gas carrier vessels participated in the Coast Guard's quality ship (Qualship 21) program as of November 2020. This program requires participating ships to be lower risk cargo ships.

Our 2022 report on gas carrier exams noted that, according to Coast Guard officials, gas carriers were generally well run.²⁹ The report also noted that Congress has taken legislative action to strengthen vessel safety since the early 1970s and that gas carriers are statutorily required to receive an annual compliance exam.³⁰ We recommended that the Coast Guard conduct an assessment of adopting a risk-based approach for gas carrier compliance exams. The intent of this recommendation was to explore the appropriateness and feasibility of changing the frequency of exams.

In your January 2022 report entitled *Assessment of a Risk-based Approach for Conducting Gas Carrier Exams Is Needed*, you noted in figure 3 that approximately 77 percent of Gas Carrier Compliance Exams are completed by Coast Guard Sector Houston-Galveston and Coast Guard Sector Corpus Christi, Texas.

Question 3. In what ways would the Coast Guard's adoption of a risk-based approach to gas carrier examinations relieve the disproportionately large marine inspection burden that is placed on Coast Guard units in Texas?

Answer. The Coast Guard's adoption of a risk-based approach to gas carrier compliance exams could help it better manage marine inspections in Texas. For example, during our review, marine inspectors in Sector Houston-Galveston told us that, like the overall marine inspection workforce, there was an insufficient number of marine inspectors qualified to conduct gas carrier examinations. These officials also told us many gas carrier vessels are well run, and conducting gas carrier examinations based on risk could free up limited resources to inspect riskier oil, chemical, or other vessels. This change could make the marine inspections in the sector more efficient and effective.

However, according to the 2024 National Academy of Sciences report discussed above, gas carrier exams represent a relatively small portion of the Coast Guard's total workload and responsibility. The report noted that in 2022, gas carrier exams accounted for less than 8 percent of all Port State Control exams completed by the Coast Guard.

Additionally, in 2022, we reported that the staffing shortage that affects gas carrier exams is part of a larger workforce planning challenge for the Coast Guard. For example, we found that although the Coast Guard developed a tool to estimate the number and type of field personnel needed at specific sectors and subordinate field

²⁷ See GAO, *Coast Guard: Enhancements Needed to Strengthen Marine Inspection Workforce Planning Efforts*, GAO-22-104465 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2022).

²⁸ In April 2023, the Coast Guard updated performance and training guidance that outlined responsibilities for individuals to submit recently acquired training or education into the individual's record prior to the first of July of each year. By taking this step, the Coast Guard will better ensure that it has the information needed to make annual staffing decisions for its marine inspection workforce and identify and address possible competency gaps.

²⁹ GAO, *Coast Guard: Assessment of a Risk-Based Approach for Conducting Gas Carrier Exams Is Needed*, GAO-22-105432 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2022).

³⁰ *Id.* at 18, 18 n.39 (citing Ports and Waterways Safety Act of 1972, Port and Tanker Safety Act of 1978, and 46 U.S.C. § 3714).

units, it collected limited data to forecast future workforce and industry trends that could affect the supply and demand for marine inspectors.

We also found that there was no requirement for marine inspectors to input newly earned competency information in the Coast Guard's human resources database, which it uses to assess whether certain marine safety positions are staffed with personnel who have the needed skills. The Coast Guard requires that inspectors that perform gas carrier exams take extensive training and gain requisite experience before they can conduct exams.

We recommended that the Coast Guard require military and civilian marine inspectors to update their competency information in the Coast Guard's human resources database. In 2023, the Coast Guard implemented this recommendation by updating its guidance to require individuals to submit recently acquired training or education into the individual's record prior to the first of July of each year. Our recommendation for the Coast Guard to collect additional data on the marine inspection workforce and maritime industry to forecast future workforce needs has not yet been implemented, but the Coast Guard is taking steps to address it.

