



Testimony
of

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on

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Introduction

Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Air and Marine Operations' (AMO) unwavering commitment to enforcing U.S. laws, interdicting illegal drugs, and securing our Nation's borders. As a frontline law enforcement component of CBP, AMO actively detects, deters, and disrupts illicit drug activity at the border and beyond.

Born out of the legacy U.S. Customs Service, AMO was established in 2006 as an integral part of CBP's comprehensive border security mission and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) risk-based and multi-layered approach to national security. AMO agents are credentialed federal law enforcement officers¹ with a broad range of authorities that enable them to operate in the land, air, and sea domains, providing a critical layer of continuity in counternarcotics operations.

AMO's unique positioning – its legal authorities, specialized assets, and operational capabilities – allows it to detect and interdict illicit drug activity beyond our Nation's border. Operating in source and transit zones, between ports of entry, in coastal waters, and interior waterways, AMO protects the United States against criminal drug smuggling networks, including Mexican cartels, seeking to exploit our maritime domain and approaches, among other threats.

State of the Maritime Border

Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) continue to escalate their efforts to infiltrate our borders and flooding American communities with illegal and deadly drugs. These criminal organizations operate with immense capability, capacity, and nearly unlimited resources. Their illegal drug production operations are sophisticated, and they continually adjust their tactics, techniques, and routes to circumvent detection and interdiction by law enforcement.

Illicit activity in the maritime environment is a threat to U.S. border security. The maritime domain is generally less restricted than the air and land environments and connects to more than 95,000 miles of U.S. shoreline. Thousands of vessels enter or operate in U.S. territorial waters every day. While the vast majority operate for recreation or legitimate commerce, some engage in smuggling and other illegal activity. Detecting illegal activity and apprehending any associated smuggling can be challenging, as many smuggling crafts hide in plain sight amongst legitimate traffic, while others transit remote areas far offshore to try to elude detection. Additionally, smugglers use a variety of crafts tailored to the area and amount of contraband they are smuggling to best evade detection, including modified fishing boats, go-fast vessels, pangas, low profile vessels, and semi-submersibles. Vessels are much faster than they were twenty years ago, often leaving law enforcement little time to interdict them before reaching our shores.

AMO continues to encounter increased risk and violence in the course of its role in intercepting smugglers in the maritime environment. Since its establishment, AMO has used disabling fire on the engines of fleeing smuggler vessels nearly 350 times. Additionally, in November 2022, three AMO Marine Interdiction Agents were shot, with one tragically being killed during a vessel stop

¹ 6 U.S.C. § 211(f); 19 U.S.C. § 1589a; 8 U.S.C § 1357

with smugglers off the coast of Puerto Rico.² Precise engagement and rapid neutralization of risk is key to safely resolving water-based law enforcement actions. AMO continually refines its maritime interdiction capabilities and tactics to meet ever evolving threats.

AMO's Maritime Counternarcotics Operations

AMO remains at the forefront of the Nation's efforts to combat maritime drug smuggling and continues to intercept tons of dangerous illicit drugs every year, keeping them from reaching our shores and communities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, AMO enforcement efforts led to the seizure of 233,662 pounds of drugs.³ Approximately 76 percent of these seizures occurred in the maritime environment, with AMO enforcement actions leading to the seizure of 162,269 pounds of cocaine, 15,113 pounds of marijuana, and 172 pounds of methamphetamine.

Maritime Enforcement Authorities

Despite AMO's unique cross-domain law enforcement capabilities, in the maritime environment, with few exceptions,⁴ AMO's maritime law enforcement authority⁵ is generally limited to areas within the historical "customs waters"⁶ – or 12 nautical miles from the coastline – of the United States. This geographic constraint challenges AMO's ability to effectively counter current and evolving modern threats and situations. Specifically, as modern technology continues to change and expand rapidly, the performance and speed of maritime vessels improves, including those used to violate U.S. law or evade U.S. law enforcement, the 12 nautical mile limit no longer provides responding law enforcement with sufficient time to interdict such vessels. This affects our ability to decide how and where to conduct engagement with suspect vessels, often preventing AMO's interdiction of vessels in time to prevent their escape, placing our law enforcement capability at a significant disadvantage.

CBP continues to work with Congress on legislative changes to extend the customs waters from 12 nautical miles to 24 nautical miles consistent with Presidential Proclamation 7219. This extension of law enforcement authorities would enable AMO to more effectively enforce U.S. laws at sea as well as increasing presence further from shore where we have saved lives at sea.

AMO is committed to its maritime security mission and continues to make investments in its highly trained agents, vessels, aircraft, and technological capabilities to advance the effectiveness of its operations. These investments support AMO's ongoing ability to effectively respond to illegal drug activity in the maritime environment, but also contribute to other AMO enforcement actions, including those that led to over 1,000 arrests and the seizure of 1,500 weapons and \$12.6 million in U.S. currency in FY 2024.

² <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/speeches-and-statements/cbp-marine-interdiction-agent-dies-line-duty-near-puerto-rico>

³ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics/air-and-marine-operations-statistics>

⁴ In certain circumstances, AMO is authorized to operate on the high seas, for instance when enforcing laws on U.S. registered vessels (19 C.F.R. § 162.3), hovering vessels (19 U.S.C. § 1401(k); 19 U.S.C. § 1587(a)), and vessels subject to hot pursuit (19 U.S.C. § 1581(d)). Additionally, beyond the customs waters, AMO may enforce the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. § 70501-70502), where appropriate.

⁵ See, e.g. 19 U.S.C. § 1581, 1587, 1589a.

⁶ 19 U.S.C. §§ 1401(j), 1709(c).

Interdiction Assets, Capabilities, and Technology

In support of its maritime border security mission, AMO deploys a fleet of high-speed Coastal Interceptor Vessels engineered for rapid pursuit and interdiction of non-compliant vessels. These vessels are crewed by highly trained agents authorized to use all necessary force, including warning shots and disabling fire to stop fleeing vessels.

In addition to our maritime interdiction efforts with our marine interceptors on the water, we also contribute a significant amount of air assets to these operations. AMO's fleet of maritime patrol aircraft are functionally designed and outfitted for maritime detection and surveillance. The P-3s and DHC-8 aircraft provide long range, high-endurance capabilities in remote source and transit zones while the Super King Air 350 Multi-Role Enforcement Aircraft (MEA) further expand aerial surveillance, closing detection and enforcement gaps in the Caribbean. Equipped with advanced sensors, communications, and radar systems, these aircraft are credited with the interdiction of 150,380 pounds of cocaine and 11,670 flight hours within the Western Hemisphere Transit Zones in FY 2024, which equated to 13 pounds of narcotics interdicted per flight hour.

The use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in the maritime environment has also increased AMO's ability to effectively identify, detect, monitor, and track conveyances involved in illegal activity. In partnership with DHS's Science and Technology Directorate, AMO modified two MQ-9s to BigWing variants, significantly increasing fuel capacity and flight endurance. In addition to the added operational reach, these Big Wing aircraft have the added ability to surveil surface targets much longer while awaiting interdiction surface forces to arrive. AMO has been employing UAS in the maritime environment since 2020, contributing to the seizure of over 81,000 pounds of cocaine and 46,000 pounds of marijuana.

AMO is heavily invested in a variety of ground-based radars and sensors increasing maritime domain awareness along our littoral borders. We've taken tethered aero stats traditionally used for air detection only and integrated maritime surface radars. These have illuminated maritime approaches around Puerto Rico, South Texas into the Gulf, and the Florida Straits with future sites planned for Southern California. Other tower and ground-based radar systems have provided additional radar detection around Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, South Florida, and the Great Lakes. Over the last three years, these systems have contributed to the seizure of over 17,200 pounds of cocaine, 15,600 pounds of fish from illicit fishing practices, and \$2 million in U.S. currency.

Advanced technology, including the BigPipe real-time video system and the Minotaur mission integration system, link AMO's tactical assets, aircraft, and vessels, thereby providing AMO with a streamlined and efficient information collecting and sharing capability. The Air and Marine Operations Center (AMOC) simultaneously tracks, processes, and integrates multiple sensor feeds and sources of information to provide comprehensive domain awareness in support of CBP's border security mission. Artificial intelligence and machine learning initiatives at AMO are improving threat detection efforts by processing vast amounts of surveillance data in real time. AMO will continue to modernize its fleet and sensor systems to enhance its data analysis capabilities and operational performance in diverse marine environments and increase

its ability to adapt to the challenges of securing the maritime border and approaches to the United States.

Operational Coordination

AMO leverages its capabilities in the maritime environment by forging effective operational partnerships with USCG, the United States Navy, and a variety of federal, state, local, tribal, and foreign partners. AMO works closely with DHS Joint Task Force East (JTF-E) and is one of the largest contributors of flight hours to Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) supporting counternarcotics operations in the vast 42 million square mile source and transit zones spanning the Pacific, Atlantic, and Caribbean areas of operation. Frequent cooperation with foreign partners is imperative, and over the last few years we've increased focus on the Eastern Caribbean and strengthened partnerships with the foreign countries and island nations throughout the Lesser Antilles, thus creating a force multiplier of surveillance and interdiction assets throughout the Southern approaches to Puerto Rico.

Conclusion

AMO's efforts are a cornerstone of CBP's border security mission, its capabilities crucial for intercepting contraband and disrupting illicit activity before it reaches our shores.

Since its creation in 2006, AMO has evolved into a key component of the Homeland Security enterprise and one of the largest civilian aviation and maritime law enforcement aviation and maritime forces in the world. As a critical component of CBP, AMO remains fully engaged in safeguarding the nation by anticipating and confronting security threats through aviation and maritime law enforcement, innovative capabilities, and partnerships at the border and beyond. This mission is achieved by monitoring thousands of miles of air, maritime, and land borders around the clock; defending the United States against terrorist threats; detecting and deterring illicit trafficking of persons, drugs, weapons, money, and other goods; and disrupting criminal networks.

Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I look forward to answering your questions.