

REMARKS BY

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BEFORE

THE U.S. COMMISSION ON OCEAN POLICY

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Good Afternoon Admiral Watkins and distinguished members of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. I am RADM James Underwood, Commander of the Seventeenth Coast Guard District in Juneau, Alaska. I want to thank you for this opportunity for me to discuss with you the Coast Guard's activities relating to living marine resources and the ocean environment in Alaska.

(Brief summary of current Coast Guard operations in Alaska)

As prior Coast Guard panelists have likely testified, rapid response to emergency situations and efficiency using available resources have long been Coast Guard hallmarks. That is certainly true here in Alaska. Nearly all of my operational assets here are multi-mission capable. Cutters on law enforcement patrols, for example, are always ready to shift immediately to conduct search and rescue. Similarly, our marine safety personnel, whose primary focus is prevention of maritime casualties, are always prepared to shift into spill response. Our ability to establish a visible presence combined with our multi-mission focus and ability to quickly transition from one activity to another enables the Coast Guard to make a significant contribution to our Nation's efforts to protect the marine environment.

COAST GUARD ROLE IN FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

The Coast Guard's primary role in fisheries management is to enforce the regulations that make the various management plans work. We traditionally provide enforcement in the form of cutter and aircraft patrols and at-sea boardings. In Alaska, we also assist the National Marine Fisheries Service by providing dockside boardings for monitoring catch offloads of halibut and sablefish.

As you may know, fisheries is a billion dollar-a-year industry in Alaska and is the state's largest employer. There are over 16,000 vessels involved in fisheries, employing 33,000 people year round (70,000 in the summer). By catch value, Alaska has two of the three largest fisheries offload ports in the U.S., and fisheries are second only to oil in producing wealth for the state. Alaskan waters produce 50% of the nation's seafood and 29% of the world's ocean protein. Because of the importance of fishing in this region, it is our top law enforcement mission in Alaska.

Our fisheries enforcement operations in Alaska emphasize four areas:

- 1) Our maritime boundary with Russia in the Bering Sea
- 2) High seas driftnet enforcement
- 3) Domestic fisheries enforcement
- 4) Enforcement of regulations related to endangered species

MARITIME BOUNDARY LINE

Protecting our border with Russia in the Bering Sea is our highest single law enforcement priority in the District, and one of the highest in the Coast Guard nationally. Drastic overfishing of pollock stocks on the Russian side of the Bering Sea, coupled with the change in government and reduction in resources for fisheries enforcement there in the last decade has left the pollock resource in the Russian EEZ very depressed.

As a result, a large number of Russian and other foreign trawlers, sometimes 50+, work right along the MBL, intercepting pollock migrating from the U.S. zone into the Russian zone. There is a significant economic benefit to be realized for those vessels if they can fish inside the U.S. EEZ. Complicating the situation is that fact that Russia has never ratified the 1990 MBL agreement with the U.S. that shifted the border westwards. Many in the Russian Far East fishing industry feel as if “traditional Russian fishing grounds” were unfairly given to the U.S. To protect the border and keep this extremely large harvesting capacity in the Russian EEZ, the Coast Guard maintains an almost constant presence on the MBL. In the past 3 weeks, our cutter on the MBL has detected 2 incursions, intercepted the vessels, and worked to prosecute the cases.

We have also worked very hard to engage our Russian Federal Border Service counterparts in Kamchatka to police the border together, and cooperatively work to prosecute any incursions.

HIGH SEAS DRIFTNET

We patrol the vast North Pacific beyond our EEZ protecting U. S. salmon stocks from illegal high seas drift net operations, a mission that has high public interest both in the state and nationally.

Because of the great distances involved, this is a mission suitable

only for our largest cutters, and most capable aircraft. A typical C-130 aircraft deployment for that mission involves a 1200 nm transit from our base in Kodiak to Sheyma Island in the Aleutian chain, then a series of 8-10 hours patrols south to the high threat area. After 4-6 days, the C-130 returns to Kodiak.

This mission involves cooperative international efforts conducted under the auspices of the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission with member countries of Japan, Russia, and Canada. In recent years this international team has detected and seized several vessels engaged in illegal activity, and currently we are having a strong deterrent effect.

In recent years the impact of driftnet fishing both on the high seas and within the Russian EEZ on salmon returning to Western Alaska streams has been a very publicly debated issue in the state. This is true especially since salmon returns there have dropped dramatically. We are confident that whatever the cause of the decline in returns to Western Alaska, it is not illegal driftnet fishing on the high seas. Never the less we will continue to patrol to ensure illegal fishing does not increase.

DOMESTIC FISHERIES ENFORCEMENT

Concerning domestic fisheries enforcement, we monitor over 200 time, area, and species specific openings and closings. The Coast Guard ensures vessels fish where they ought to be, when they ought to, and that

federally required observers are free to collect their data. We work with the National Marine Fisheries Service to construct our enforcement priorities for the year and identify boarding goals for each major fishery. We typically conduct approximately 600 boardings of fishing vessels in Alaska each year.

The Alaskan halibut IFQ fishery is the largest IFQ fishery in the world. Providing enforcement presence for this fishery now requires more resources for us than what was required under the old derby system. On the plus side, IFQs let fishermen better take weather and market conditions into account... something not possible under the old derby system.

ENDANGERED SPECIES PROTECTION

Finally, we provide surveillance of the extensive rookery and no-trawl areas created in response to the decline of endangered Steller sea lions. We also enforce seabird avoidance requirements for longline fishing vessels, implemented to protect the endangered short tailed albatross. Our cutters have also actively supported NOAA in their research on the endangered Northern Right Whale by providing a platform from which to take biological samples, and our crews have worked on a number of occasions to free humpback whales entangled in fishing gear.

I'd like to note that all of our cutters and aircraft that are performing these law enforcement missions are also specifically tasked to support our initiative to increase our maritime domain awareness efforts within the district. In this way, we receive significant support for our homeland security mission with these assets. Also potentially contributing is the current increased use of vessel monitoring systems on fishing vessels in Alaska, and the potential future use of automatic identification systems on commercial vessels larger than 300 gross tons in the future.

MAGNUSON-STEVENSON ACT

Overall, I think federal fisheries management under the Act is working well in Alaska... stocks are generally healthy, there is a commitment to the resource, and a culture of science and conservation guides the North Pacific Council and the resource stakeholders.

The Act provides non-voting Council seats to Coast Guard District Commanders. I take that responsibility very seriously, and am pleased to report that in my view the process works very well in the North Pacific. The Coast Guard is a partner in Council actions; our input is solicited and carefully considered.

HOMELAND SECURITY

As it did everywhere in the United States, the Coast Guard in Alaska responded immediately to the security threat faced by the country following the attacks on 9/11. We received direction from the Commandant of the Coast Guard that placed this new “Homeland Security” mission on par with SAR as the two highest mission priorities for the Coast Guard. That tasking remains effective at this time. In Alaska, we “stood up” an Incident Command structure to organize our response to the threat and immediately moved cutters and aircraft to provide security to ports in Alaska. We concentrated primarily on what we considered the “critical infrastructure and vessels” that were most at risk in Alaska: the Valdez Marine Terminal, the LNG terminal and laden LNG tankers at Nikisiki, and the cruise ships operating in State waters.

Our efforts were and are closely coordinated with Alaska Command, FBI counter terrorism unit, AST and ANG. This cooperation is not new. Long before 9/11, our day-to-day operations, from SAR to law enforcement to pollution prevention and response, forced us to build solid working relationships with federal and state agency partners. We simply cannot perform our Coast Guard missions properly in the vast state of Alaska without the cooperation and assistance of other agencies. I suspect those agencies would say the same.

That shift of assets since 9/11 to meet new threats has impacted other law enforcement missions here. In FY 2002 D17 diverted ship and

aircraft assets from other mission areas to protect ports. While D17 has been able to reassign a number of fisheries enforcement resources back to the fisheries mission, there will still be a significant reduction in 2002 compared to previous years: That is:

- A 14% reduction in major cutters (110 days transferred to homeland security in D11/D13),
- 60% reduction in WPB hours (3500 hours shifted to Valdez and other high priority ports).
- We anticipate a 30% reduction in at sea boardings due to the shift of these cutter resources to homeland security.

Our ability to perform search and rescue was, and currently is, unaffected by this shift of operational units towards the homeland security mission.

READINESS

I also wish to briefly comment on Coast Guard readiness, a challenge complicated by the extreme weather and huge distances that are a part of life in this great state and the North Pacific. Throughout the Pacific Area, the Coast Guard is stretched thin to meet the challenges posed by our expanded homeland security mission, and other growth missions such as counter-narcotics and migrant interdiction. I am feeling the

impact here in Alaska, and am responding by ensuring the resources I get are directed at the most serious problems. The demanding operating environment in Alaska also makes us heavily dependent on our largest ships and aircraft... which are quickly becoming our oldest. To the extent that our services are important to the proper stewardship of our nation's coastal zone and resources Mr. Chairman, I ask your support to Coast Guard programs to recapitalize our aging assets.

CONCLUSION

In Alaska, operational excellence, in the air, in our ports and on the water, define what we are about. We are committed to providing the public with the best Coast Guard services possible. We will respond to search and rescue cases, and protect our ports. We will enforce our fisheries laws, protect our natural resources and prevent and respond to pollution incidents. And with continued effective partnerships and your committee's support, we will continue to be successful.

Thank you.