

Coast Guard: Illegal Fishing in Oceans a National Security Issue



Boarding officers from the U.S. Coast Guard and Canadian Conservation and Protection navigate to board a fishing vessel in the South Pacific in January 2019. Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans

WASHINGTON – Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) is a national security issue that threatens global economic order and the sovereignty of nations and that enforcement is over-stretched to counter the threat, U.S. officials said.

IUU includes fishing without a permit, catching over a legal limit, catching the wrong species and catching fish that are too small.

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Speaking during a Navy League Sea-Air-Space: Virtual Edition webcast on April 13, Rear Adm. Doug Fears, the Coast Guard's assistant commandant for response policy, said that IUU "is an issue of sovereignty and a national security issue because the competition for global fish stock and protein is ongoing."

Fears said the Coast Guard "is as an internationally trusted partner and is a supporter of an international rules-based governance structure that benefits each country that has an economic exclusion zone."



Rear Adm. Doug Fears (left), the U.S. Coast Guard's assistant commandant for response policy, and Dave Hogan, acting director of the Office of Marine Conservation with

the U.S. State Department, discuss Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing during a Navy League Sea-Air-Space: Virtual Edition webinar.

Dave Hogan, acting director of the Office of Marine Conservation with the U.S. State Department, who also spoke during the Navy League webcast, said the State Department negotiates with international and regional partners to establish the rules to manage the fish stocks on the high seas in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service, the Coast Guard and other agencies.

"Each nation exercises sovereignty over its economic exclusion zone," Fears said. "When another nation violates that, [IUU] is harming the fish stock that may not be recoverable."

Fears also pointed out that some nations are engaging in aggressive behavior against others in driving away fishing boats of other nations that are legally fishing and thus violating the sovereignty of those nations. He cited a recent example of Chinese coast guard activity against an Indonesian fishing vessel. The U.S. Defense Department on April 9 called out China's coast guard for [sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel](#).

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Rear Adm. Doug Fears

Hogan said the United States has an ongoing dialogue with China on IUU issues. He said the State Department has asked China to "do better" with its distant-water fleet fishing in the waters of other countries.

He said IUU fishing is going on in all the world's oceans, and that the violators include stateless high-seas drift-net vessels in the North Pacific. Whereas most fishing companies worldwide are privately owned, China's are state-run.

"The United States Coast Guard has the authorities, the capability, the global reach – we're trusted partners," Fears said. "Our model is a well-respected model."

"Our limiting factor is capacity," he added. "While we operate around the world, we can't operate in all the places that deserve the attention in IUU fishing."

Fears cited the South China Sea, the waters off West Africa and the central and western Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico as prime areas where IUU occurs.

Hogan said the United States is still trying to find a multilateral solution to the competing claims in the South China Sea. He also said he encourages nations to cooperate, despite their disputes, so fish stocks aren't depleted and that their own economic security and the environment aren't undermined.

Fears said that IUU often is networked by organized crime, such as the drug cartels, which have "tentacles" in human trafficking and other smuggling operations. "A lot of the drug cartels and similar organizations monetize illicit activities, whatever they be," he said.

Fears also said a Coast Guard presence is an effective counter to IUU fishing but that the sea service needs more ships, aircraft and personnel to project that presence.