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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

B-203255

RELEASED

MAY 19, 1981

The Honorable Lloyd Bentsen
United States Senate



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Dear Senator Bentsen:

Subject: [Coast Guard Drug Interdiction on the Texas
Coast] (CED-81-104)

In your April 3, 1981, letter you requested information on the capability of the Coast Guard to control drug smuggling, particularly on the Texas coast. As we advised your office, we recently started a review of Federal efforts to combat smuggling. This review will include the Coast Guard's drug interdiction activities. The concerns expressed in your letter will be considered during this review, and we will send you a copy of our final report. However, in immediate response to your request and as agreed with your office, we are providing pertinent information that we obtained from Coast Guard officials on increases in drug traffic across the Texas coast and on Coast Guard resource limitations that affect drug interdiction efforts.

According to Coast Guard officials, drug smuggling on the Texas coast has increased over the last few years. Although the Coast Guard has established goals for deterring maritime drug smuggling, resource limitations have prevented it from achieving these goals.

We interviewed Coast Guard officials from the Operational Law Enforcement Division, the Intelligence and Security Division, the Budget Division, and the Search and Rescue Division. We reviewed Coast Guard statistics on the amount and type of drugs seized and Coast Guard resources used to interdict drug smuggling.

BACKGROUND

The primary drug targeted and seized by the Coast Guard is marijuana. (See encl. I.) The Coast Guard concentrates on this drug, in part, because it is the top income producer, accounting for 35 percent of estimated U.S. narcotic sales in 1978 (about \$15 to \$23 billion). Marijuana is also a prime

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target because its bulk makes it easier to detect and more difficult to dispose of than most other drugs. It is also more frequently transported by sea because of the quantities smuggled.)

According to the Chief, Operational Law Enforcement Division, and other Coast Guard officials, Mexico was the primary source of marijuana smuggled into the United States before 1977. However, spraying paraquat (an herbicide) on the Mexican crop in 1977-78 diminished the role of Mexico as a supplier. Coast Guard statistics show that Colombia has become the main source of marijuana smuggled into the United States, supplying about 70 percent of marijuana imports in 1978. Coast Guard officials said that the shift from Mexican to Colombian marijuana led to an increase in maritime smuggling and a decrease in overland smuggling. The officials also stated that some of the increase in maritime smuggling was occurring on the Texas coast.

According to the Coast Guard, the street value of the marijuana it seized increased from \$1.2 billion in fiscal year 1978 to \$2.3 billion in fiscal year 1981. In 1979 the street value of drugs (principally marijuana) seized by the Coast Guard amounted to 40 percent of the total street value of drugs seized by all Federal agencies.)

DRUG SMUGGLING ON THE TEXAS COAST HAS INCREASED

According to the chief, operational intelligence branch, and other Coast Guard officials, several factors have contributed to the increase in maritime drug smuggling on the Texas coast over the last few years. These factors include the concentration of Coast Guard resources in southern Florida and the Cuban refugee "sea lift" operation in the spring and summer of 1980.)

The Coast Guard concentrates on drug smuggling in southern Florida because most of the marijuana smuggled into the country enters through this area. Coast Guard officials told us that concentrating on this area has led some drug smuggling operations to relocate to other areas, including Texas.)

Coast Guard statistics illustrate the effect of the Cuban sea lift on drug interdiction efforts on the Texas coast. In fiscal year 1979, 208,000 pounds of marijuana were seized in the Texas coastal area. During fiscal year 1980--which includes the period of the Cuban sea lift--only 68,000 pounds were seized. Coast Guard officials said that the decline in seizures was due primarily to the decline in Coast Guard patrols during the sea lift. After the sea lift, marijuana seizures in Texas increased during the first 3 months of fiscal year 1981 to 118,400 pounds. Coast

Guard officials expect some permanent increase in drug traffic across the Texas coast because a "smuggling infrastructure" (a network of personnel and equipment used for smuggling) was built up during the sea lift.)

LIMITED RESOURCES PREVENT THE COAST GUARD FROM ACHIEVING ITS DRUG INTERDICTION GOAL

In April 1980 we reported that the Coast Guard had resource limitations that prevented it from adequately fulfilling its mission. 1/ The report pointed out that these limitations were the result of increases in the Coast Guard's responsibilities, which were not accompanied by adequate increases in its resources. According to the Chief, Operational Law Enforcement Division, resource limitations are still preventing the Coast Guard from reaching its drug interdiction goal.

The Coast Guard's ultimate goal is to detect or deter 75 percent of the drugs smuggled by sea. 2/ The Coast Guard has determined that this level of interdiction would reduce the profit margin to 25 percent, thus reducing the profitability of drug smuggling sufficiently to discourage it.

At present, the Coast Guard estimates that it is seizing an average of 15 to 20 percent of the marijuana smuggled by sea. According to Coast Guard officials, the Coast Guard's resources will have to be increased significantly to reach the 75 percent goal. The following table shows the increases in operating times for cutters, boats, and planes that the Coast Guard believes are needed to achieve this goal. Additional resources would be needed for the Coast Guard to attain these levels of operating time.

Percent Increase in Operating Time Needed to Achieve a 75-Percent Interdiction Level

Cutters	277
Boats	121
Aircraft	361

1/"The Coast Guard--Limited Resources Curtail Ability to Meet Responsibilities," CED-80-76, April 3, 1980.

2/See our report entitled "The Coast Guard's Role in Drug Interception--How Much is Enough," CED-79-40, February 12, 1979, for a discussion of Coast Guard drug interdiction goals.

One of the Coast Guard's strategies for improving its drug interdiction record is to concentrate its resources on intercepting "motherships" (vessels carrying large quantities of marijuana from the source country) before the cargo can be divided among smaller boats. The most effective means of intercepting motherships is to concentrate on four Caribbean "choke points": the Yucatan Channel, the Windward Passage, the Mona Passage, and the Anegada Passage. (See encl. II.) The Chief, Operational Law Enforcement Division, and other officials said that these points should be covered continuously by cutters. To maintain this coverage, three cutters would have to be assigned to each Coast Guard station at these choke points. Coast Guard officials said that at present the choke points can only be covered about 18 percent of the time.

Coast Guard officials also noted that the number of aircraft and cutters has not increased since our 1980 report was issued. In Texas, one airplane has been deactivated and the number of cutters and helicopters has remained the same.

The chief of the Coast Guard's budget execution branch said that fiscal year 1981 appropriations (including pending supplementals) would be about \$2 billion, as compared with the 1980 appropriation of about \$1.7 billion. The Coast Guard's 1981 authorized level for full-time permanent employees is 46,140. According to the official, the budget proposed by the administration for fiscal years 1981 and 1982 would reduce the number of civilian positions by 682.

CONCLUSIONS

Marijuana smuggling across the Texas coast has increased while the numbers of Coast Guard cutters and aircraft used to interdict this smuggling have not. Increased Coast Guard resources are needed to achieve the Coast Guard's 75 percent drug interdiction goal.

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At your request, we did not obtain written agency comments. The matters covered in this report were discussed with Coast Guard officials, and their comments are included where appropriate.

B-203255

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 10 days from the date of the report. At that time we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others on request.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Henry Eschwege". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Henry Eschwege
Director

Enclosures - 2

QUANTITY OF DRUGS SEIZED BY COAST GUARD

	Fiscal year <u>1978</u>	Fiscal year <u>1979</u>	Fiscal year <u>1980</u>	Fiscal year <u>1981 (note a)</u>
Marijuana	2.9 million lbs.	2.8 million lbs.	1.2 million lbs.	2.7 million lbs.
Quaaludes and other dangerous drugs	0	500,000 doses	4.7 million doses	400,000 doses
Hashish	0	42,000 lbs.	2,500 lbs.	0

a/As of April 23, 1981.

Source: U.S. Coast Guard data obtained in April 1981.

PRINCIPAL CHOKES POINTS
FOR MARIJUANA INTERDICTION

