

**Statement of Dr. Ruth Perry,
Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans
and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs
before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Africa Subcommittee
Hearing on Africa Maritime Security Challenges
Wednesday, December 10, 2025**

Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Booker, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about the impact of maritime challenges in Africa on the U.S. fishing industry and how the Department of State will take action to protect the livelihoods of our fishermen.

As a proud Texan and longtime steward of the Gulf of America, I know firsthand the threat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing poses to our economy, environment, and national security. The Gulf is America's working coast – vital to food systems and energy infrastructure. Yet foreign vessels, like those from Mexico, deplete iconic species like Red Snapper and undermine fishing industry efforts to maintain sustainable fisheries. This is not just an environmental issue – it is about sovereignty and economic security.

Under the leadership of State's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, we convened an emergency interagency task force with DOJ, NOAA, and the Coast Guard. For the first time, individuals caught illegally fishing are being prosecuted under the Lacey Act – a critical step forward. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, I am committed to building this momentum. The stakes are too high; we must act decisively to protect our fish, our fishermen, and America's working coast.

IUU fishing off Africa's coast is not just a local problem – it threatens U.S. fishermen, our industry, and our national security. U.S. commercial and recreational fishing generate nearly half a trillion dollars annually and supports 2.5 million jobs. We've built the world's most respected fisheries management system – science based, strongly enforced, and proven to ensure long-term species health. But our companies face unfair competition from nations that ignore catch limits, food safety, and labor laws – all practices driving prices

artificially low. The State Department is committed to confronting this challenge head on, protecting American jobs, and defending the integrity of our seafood supply.

Over the years, U.S. market share for American seafood producers has steadily fallen, and more than 80 percent of the seafood consumed in the United States is imported. Data suggest imports have fallen this year, but fish and fish products coming into the U.S. from Africa are still valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

IUU fishing in African waters not only distorts global markets and creates unfair competition for U.S. seafood producers – it directly undermines the livelihoods of American commercial and recreational fishermen. Highly migratory species of tuna and billfish range across the Atlantic Ocean; illegal and unsustainable harvests off Africa can mean fewer of these keystone fish return to our waters. That damage is just part of what some sources say is roughly \$10 billion in annual losses Africa suffers from IUU fishing – driven by both domestic fleets and distant-water fleets, primarily from China. But the consequences go far beyond economics. This illegal activity is increasingly tied to transnational crime, including human trafficking, drug smuggling, and maritime insecurity – posing a direct threat to regional stability and ultimately American security.

Advancing and defending the U.S. fishing industry is an administration priority. President Trump's April Executive Order on Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness calls for a whole-of-government approach to promote the productive harvest of our seafood resources, combat IUU fishing, and protect our seafood markets from unfair trade practices.

The Department of State works with the Department of Commerce and other agencies to ensure the American fishing industry competes on a level playing field. Together, we push the other members of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations to adopt binding fishing rules for shared stocks that are in line with our high domestic standards – based on the best available science and backed by effective fisheries monitoring and control. Where foreign nations break the rules

or refuse to step up, the State Department works with our interagency partners to ban their vessels from U.S. ports and close our market to their products.

A unified interagency response isn't just important, it's essential. Combating IUU fishing and its associated criminal networks requires effectively coordinated and efficiently deployed U.S. capabilities. This is why the State Department, NOAA, and the Coast Guard lead the whole-of-government effort to combat IUU fishing under the Maritime Security and Fisheries Enforcement Act, or the Maritime SAFE Act, since 2019. To protect U.S. fishermen and our markets, we've provided technology, training, and equipment; participated in enforcement actions; and created frameworks for lasting regional cooperation throughout Africa. For example, Ghana now uses the American-made SmartMast system to increase its maritime domain awareness, setting the stage for increased cooperation with its neighbors. These achievements are something to be proud of. But the danger to the American fishing industry from IUU fishing in African waters persists.

Progress is moving too slowly. To protect our fishing industry, we must ensure American producers stay competitive worldwide and that our economy is strengthened and the industry is preserved for the next generations. That means securing access to healthy fish stocks and guarding against threats from bad actors and irresponsible nations. The Department of State is building a refined approach that is faster, more targeted, and more agile to combat the dynamic threat posed to American industry by illegal, unsustainable, and unfair fishing practices in African waters.

The State Department is closing the gap between America's high standards and the exploitative practices of fleets in African waters. The U.S. fishing industry sets the global benchmark for sustainability, with thriving stocks to prove it. But protecting this success requires coordinated action—diplomatic, enforcement, and scientific. We will punish bad actors, hold partners accountable, put American fishermen first, and defend our waters, our economy, and our way of life.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today.