

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“Securing the Border: Understanding Threats
and Strategies for the Maritime Border”
July 15, 2015

As submitted for the record:

Today marks the eighth hearing this committee has held on border security since we began exploring this issue in early March. Over the course of the last several months, we have examined transnational crime on our southwest border, vulnerabilities on the northern border, and technology and infrastructure solutions at our ports of entry. Today, the committee seeks to understand the challenges facing our longest U.S. border: the U.S. maritime border.

The United States coastline, which includes the Atlantic, Caribbean, Pacific and Great Lakes coasts, measures over 95,000 miles long—one of the longest coastlines in the world. Across these coastlines migrants from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti seek to illegally enter the U.S., often forced into overcrowded boats with unsafe and unsanitary conditions. Transnational criminal organizations also transport drugs—marijuana on the west coast and cocaine on the east coast—into the U.S. via the maritime border.

Terrorism is also a continuing threat across our maritime borders. In 2012, the Department of Homeland Security released its Northern Border Strategy, which in part focused on the vulnerabilities in the Great Lakes region. The report cautioned that these shared waterways provided a conduit for potential exploitation. In particular, the ability of small vessels to traverse the Great Lakes and blend in with commercial trade and recreational boaters creates a challenging enforcement environment. As a Wisconsinite, I can attest to this observation firsthand.

Despite these threats, as compared to the southwest border, the U.S. has very little domain awareness across our maritime border. And of the threats of which we do become aware, the U.S. Coast Guard is only able to respond to approximately 30 percent. This means that, similar to our southwest border, along which we are only interdicting 5 to 10 percent of the drugs smuggled across, a large amount of drugs are coming across our maritime border undetected.

Multiple government agencies are tasked with ensuring that U.S. coastlines remain protected from these various threats. These agencies include the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Air and Marine (OAM), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Today representatives from these agencies will testify to the threats at our maritime border and the strategies they have deployed to secure our coastlines.

I thank the witnesses for their willingness to provide these important insights and I look forward to their testimony.