TESTIMONY OF MERRICK BURDEN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MARINE CONSERVATION ALLIANCE Before the SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE Regarding UNITED STATES COAST GUARD OPERATIONS IN ALASKA

I would like to thank the Chair and Ranking member of the subcommittee for holding this hearing today. I would also like to thank Senator Murkowski for her ongoing commitment to the United States Coast Guard, the Alaska fishing industry, and fishing dependent coastal communities. For the record, my name is Merrick Burden, and I am the Executive Director of the Marine Conservation Alliance (MCA). MCA is a broad based coalition of seafood harvesters, processors, fishing dependent coastal communities, and western Alaska Community Development Quota (CDQ) organizations involved in the Federal groundfish and shellfish fisheries off Alaska. MCA was formed to promote the sustainable use of North Pacific marine resources by present and future generations. MCA supports research and public education regarding the fishery resources of the North Pacific, and seeks practical solutions to resource conservation issues.

The fishing industry off Alaska generates over \$3 billion at the wholesale level and supports over 80,000 jobs directly and indirectly on an annual basis. It is the largest private sector employer in the state of Alaska, and it employs individuals from all over the United States who come to Alaska to work as fishermen, seafood processors, or in support industries. In many areas of coastal Alaska the seafood industry is the dominant source of employment and is the economic driver for those communities.

The fisheries of the North Pacific have often been called one of the success stories of fishery management. The volume of fishery resources extracted from the North Pacific and Bering Sea number in the millions of tons annually and many fisheries in the region have been certified as sustainable by third party verification processes. This multi-billion dollar economic engine relies upon sustainable management practices, which means domestic regulations and international treaties must be enforced.

These fisheries take place in some of the most remote areas of the United States and in some of the most hazardous maritime conditions found on earth. Sea ice and gale force winds are commonplace in the region and frequently provide hardship to those that live and work in the area. In the fall of 2011 for instance, the City of Nome, Alaska required that an ice breaker assist in getting a fuel tanker to the city in order for residents there to have heat and energy for the long winter. During the snow crab season of this past winter, the crab industry was forced to hire a tug for 3 months to regularly clear ice from the St. Paul harbor so that crab vessels could safely access the harbor to deliver their catch. In addition to these specific examples, each year fishermen injured at sea are airlifted from their vessels and transported via helicopter to Kodiak or Anchorage, several hundred miles away.

Despite the remoteness of this region, substantial amounts of commerce make their way between North America and Asia via the North Pacific Great Circle route. Ships traveling between the U.S. west coast thread their way through the Aleutian Islands, typically passing through Unimak pass which lies to the east of Dutch Harbor. Occasionally these ships find themselves in distress and in need of assistance. At times these ships have drifted ashore and broken apart, spilling fuel oil or their cargo into the waters of the North Pacific. Only a handful of years ago this very thing occurred and threatened to impact the fishing industry due to concerns from consumers over the possibility of contaminated seafood. The fishing industry responded by conducting water quality assessments and fish contamination tests to alleviate these concerns. While these assessments cost a great deal, the seafood industry in Alaska depends on consumer confidence in their products. Although there have not been any apparent impacts to the seafood industry from these events yet, increased shipping traffic increases the risk that there may be impacts in the future.

Madame Chair, the United States Coast Guard plays an important role in these waters which matter a great deal to the North Pacific seafood industry. The seafood industry has long viewed the United States Coast Guard as not only a welcome presence, but a necessary partner. The Coast Guard's task in this region is enormous. At times the Coast Guard is the lifeline of the industry as they aid fishermen in distress; they play the part of incident management and response; at other times they enforce domestic regulation and international treaties or agreements, such as the observed Russian/U.S. maritime boundary. These activities often take place in severe conditions where gale force winds, heavy seas, sea ice, and freezing spray are present that not only affect the ability of fishing vessels to harvest fish from these waters, but also affect the ability of the Coast Guard to perform rescue operations or to respond to other incidents. In these instances, mere minutes can mean the difference between a successful response and an unsuccessful one. This means that reliable, up to date equipment that can stand up to these conditions is a vital component of the Coast Guard's mission in Alaska, and to the people that rely upon the Coast Guard for their well-being.

The seafood industry is inherently at the whim of the natural environment. As the natural environment changes, so must the seafood industry. One place that is experiencing relatively dramatic change is the Arctic. Information indicates that crab, salmon, and some species of groundfish may be extending their range northward from the Bering Sea and spilling into the Arctic. If commercially-valuable fish and shellfish become established in sufficient numbers, it is possible that fisheries will look to expand northward as well. Recently, however, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council voted to close these waters to fishing for many types of species until more is known regarding the ability of this environment to support commercial fishing activities. This means that for the foreseeable future we do not expect to see much fishing in this region. Over the longer term it appears possible for fisheries to develop in the Arctic, but due to the conditions which are present in this area it is difficult for us to imagine fishing activity occurring at the same scale which it does in the Bering Sea. In any event, when U.S.-based commercial fishing activity takes place in the Arctic, if it does at all, is almost certainly many years away and therefore the needs of the Coast Guard as it relates to domestic fishing activity in the Arctic appears to be limited for some time. However, other user groups are eyeing the Arctic, such as

the oil and gas industry. These developments will require additional resources which will further expand the Coast Guard's mission off Alaska.

It recently came to our attention that the Coast Guard 17th District is facing a 19 percent reduction in the number of cutter days that can be used for fisheries law enforcement. Our understanding is that this reduction is being driven by the retirement of older Coast Guard assets which have not been replaced, and the reprioritization of remaining assets to operations in the Arctic. The seafood industry is concerned that this reduction will impact safety, enforcement, and management of North Pacific fisheries. We would ask that Congress provide funding necessary to maintain a fisheries-based Coast Guard presence that is more similar to recent years while also providing funding that will be necessary for the Coast Guard's expanding role in the Arctic.

Madame Chair, I want to thank you and members of the Committee for providing this opportunity to testify before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.