

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 16, 2026

Neil Jacobs

Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1315 East-West Highway  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Under Secretary Jacobs,

We write to express concern regarding the continued illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing for red snapper by Mexican vessels operating in U.S. waters in the Gulf of America. The Coast Guard has demonstrated sustained and effective operational enforcement through repeated interdictions and seizures; however, the continued presence of Mexican *lanchas* in U.S. waters suggests that enforcement at sea alone is insufficient to eliminate the incentive to fish illegally.<sup>1</sup> We urge the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to use its import-restriction authorities, and other applicable authorities, to address this problem in a targeted and proportionate manner that supports law-abiding U.S. fisheries.

Despite fewer vessel interdictions in 2025 than the previous year, the volume of illegally harvested red snapper seized by the Coast Guard rose 28 percent, reaching 15,859 pounds. While fewer individual *lanchas* are being stopped, those that are interdicted are carrying much larger, high-value hauls intended for the U.S. market. Furthermore, a recent DHS Office of Inspector General report found that the Coast Guard interdicts only one in every five detected foreign fishing vessels, leaving nearly 80 percent of illegal incursions unchallenged and free to enter domestic commerce through opaque supply chains.<sup>2</sup>

The Gulf of America red snapper fishery is a highly regulated domestic fishery that is shared between recreational and commercial harvesters. Allocation of the fishery between domestic stakeholders is a topic of intense policy discussion and high-level decision making, reflecting the immense value of the fishery to our nation. Mexican IUU-caught fish steals that value from both sets of American stakeholders.

Reports from the Department of the Treasury indicate that these *lanchas* are not operating as isolated or subsistence fishing ventures, but as organized operations increasingly linked to the Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico's most dangerous criminal organizations.<sup>3</sup> The continued ability to sell illegally harvested red snapper into the U.S. market is a powerful financing source for the

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Strout, *US Coast Guard interdictions of Mexican lanchas down in 2025 following prosecutions*, SUPPLY & TRADE, (Nov 2025), available at: <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/us-coast-guard-interdictions-of-mexican-lanchas-down-in-2025-following-prosecutions>

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Homeland Security, *Coast Guard Missed Opportunities to Interdict Foreign Fishing Vessels Suspected of Illegally Fishing in U.S. Waters*, OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL, (June 2025), available at: <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2025-06/OIG-25-25-Jun25.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *Treasury Sanctions Gulf Cartel Members for Smuggling and Illegal Fishing Operations*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY, (Nov 2024), available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2729>

Cartel and undermines both U.S. fisheries management and national security. As long as access to the U.S. seafood market remains available without consequence for non-compliant actors, interdictions alone will not meaningfully alter this behavior.

Congress anticipated circumstances such as these when it enacted the High Seas Driftnet Fisheries Moratorium Protection Act, which authorizes an import prohibition when foreign fishing activities undermine conservation and enforcement efforts.<sup>4</sup> To date, these import authorities have never been exercised, even as evidence mounts that illegally harvested red snapper continues to enter U.S. commerce through cartel-linked supply chains.

We respectfully urge NOAA Fisheries to evaluate—without further delay—the use of its existing statutory authority in coordination with relevant agency partners to eliminate illegal fishing in U.S. waters and prevent IUU-caught fish from entering U.S. markets. Conditioning market access on compliance through focused, risk-based measures would protect law-abiding U.S. fishermen, safeguard shared fish stocks, and remove a key economic incentive sustaining cartel-linked fishing activity while preserving lawful trade and minimizing impacts on compliant segments of the American seafood industry.

We would appreciate NOAA Fisheries' action in more aggressively applying its existing authorities to ensure that illegally harvested red snapper is not sold in the United States.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.  
United States Senator

John Cornyn

John Cornyn  
United States Senator

Roger Wicker

Roger F. Wicker  
United States Senator

Tommy Tuberville

Tommy Tuberville  
United States Senator

Rick Scott

Rick Scott  
United States Senator

John Kennedy

John Kennedy  
United States Senator

Ted Cruz

Ted Cruz  
United States Senator

Cindy Hyde-Smith

Cindy Hyde-Smith  
United States Senator

Katie Boyd Britt

Katie Boyd Britt  
United States Senator

Ashley Moody

Ashley Moody  
United States Senator

CC: Ambassador Jamieson Greer, United States Trade Representative

<sup>4</sup> High Seas Driftnet Fisheries Moratorium Protection Act, *Action to strengthen international fishery management organizations*, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1826, available at: [https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=\(title:16%20section:1826i%20edition:prelim\)](https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=(title:16%20section:1826i%20edition:prelim))