



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, & Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Nanette Barragán (D-CA)

Assessing the State of America's Seaports

January 19, 2022

Seaports are key to the movement of commerce, and thus critical enablers of the U.S. economy, especially as the country continues its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Chairwoman of the Border Security, Facilitation and Operations Subcommittee, and the Member representing the Port of Los Angeles – the largest container port in the nation, I understand how important it is that our seaports have the resources they need in order to support the safe and timely processing of trade and travel. I am encouraged that Secretary Walsh and Secretary Buttigieg have traveled to the Port of Los Angeles to see the challenges firsthand.

The Administration's attention and investment in our seaports, including the Port of Los Angeles, is critical to ensuring that goods coming through the ports make their final destination without delay. The Port of Los Angeles, like seaports across the nation, has continued operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic despite the dangers posed by the virus. As people have shifted spending habits towards more consumer goods, cargo levels have surged. This makes the issue of staffing, and protecting staff at our seaports from the virus, even more important.

Our seaports have long been understaffed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Office of Field Operations, which is the lead agency responsible for facilitating trade and travel at ports of entry. This includes our seaports, land ports, and airports. While the decline in air travel and cruises during the pandemic initially allowed CBP to redirect staff towards seaports to help with surging cargo, travel volumes are now rising across all ports of entry. In fact, some CBP officers from seaports are being detailed to assist with rising travel at land ports of entry. Even with the redirected staff, seaports were paying for additional overtime and services through the Reimbursable Services Program. As I expect we will hear from our witnesses, this band-aid approach towards staffing is not sustainable.

We also need to ensure that CBP, and our ports, are taking appropriate steps to protect the workforce during this pandemic. These frontline workers continue to facilitate trade and travel despite the risks posed by the virus, and they have this Committee's gratitude for their efforts. Seaports have also struggled with infrastructure and technology challenges, which have hampered trade facilitation over the last year. For example, at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, a lack of storage space and increase in daily ships has contributed to congestion at the port. Other, smaller ports have also experienced high wait times as CBP examination of high-risk cargo has, at times, taken up to 3 weeks to complete. Fortunately, those examinations have decreased to under 10 days since their peak.

However, concerns persist – particularly in relation to cyber security. Cyber attacks against U.S. maritime targets increased 400% in 2020, as cyber attacks continue to become more dangerous. A successful cyber attack against a major seaport could cripple trade and have significant implications for the U.S. economy. In additions, appropriately resourcing our seaports continues to be a challenge. We have

heard concerns that CBP has, at times, turned to seaports to fund upgrades to facilities and new equipment.

CBP has attempted to alleviate longstanding challenges through programs like the Reimbursable Services Program and the Customs Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (CTPAT). While these programs help meet short term needs, we need to make sure we are addressing systematic challenges. Seaports are also facing significant cyber threats, and are critical to the American economy, and we must look at fully resourcing them as cargo volume shows no signs of decreasing as the economy continues to reopen.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on what assistance Congress and my Subcommittee can offer to better support and resource ports. I am also interested in hearing any recommendations from the witnesses on changes needs to CBP's public-private partnership programs.

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