

NOAA ‘gag order’ restricts international fisheries engagement

BY DANIEL CUSICK | 02/12/2025 02:32 PM EST



The NOAA logo on a research vessel is shown. | Patrick Semansky/AP

NOAA Fisheries employees have been told to suspend communication with international collaborators until senior officials can review and vet partnerships with non-U.S. entities, according to former agency officials.

Experts say a Trump administration prohibition on communication with foreign contacts — even if temporary — could hamper NOAA’s research, which is not bound by U.S. territorial waters. It also makes it more difficult to engage with foreign allies on pressing international issues, including illegal fishing and managing highly migratory species like tuna. NOAA is also responsible for enforcing dozens of laws and treaties governing seafood imports, including codes of engagement between foreign-flagged fishing vessels on the open oceans.

Four former NOAA officials who were granted anonymity because they feared reprisals against current staff said they heard about the directive from employees inside the agency.

As of Tuesday, two of the officials said they heard the order was revised to allow staff to reply to emails from international counterparts who didn't know about the communication ban.

Multiple requests to the White House and NOAA press representatives to confirm or clarify the directive were not returned.

Outside the Commerce Department on Tuesday to show solidarity with NOAA front-line employees, [Rep. Paul Tonko \(D-N.Y.\) denounced](#) the ban as a “gag order that disrupts critical collaboration and undermines transparency” in NOAA’s international work.

While consistent with President Donald Trump’s other first-week orders calling for dramatic changes in U.S. relations with other countries — particularly on trade and border security — experts noted that the communications prohibition comes as the agency has prioritized cracking down on illegal fishing and keeping that seafood from landing in U.S. grocery stores and restaurants.

“If you’re not at the table, you get nothing,” said one former senior NOAA official with expertise on trade issues. “Rival countries would salivate at the prospect of the United States not being there.”

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Federal estimates show that more than 80 percent of seafood consumed in the United States is imported, mostly from Canada, Chile, India, Indonesia and Vietnam, where fishing standards vary depending on country-specific laws and compliance with international norms.

NOAA is responsible for enforcing those treaties and investigating and prosecuting incidents of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, or IUU, by domestic and foreign actors.

Ryan Orgera, global director of the nonprofit Accountability.Fish, which advocates for fair trade and stronger enforcement of U.S fisheries laws, said that less attention to

international fisheries means more hardship for domestic fishermen, who already face headwinds from declining fish stocks and lower dock prices due to a glut of imports.

“You cannot effectively fight IUU while withdrawing from multilateral negotiations,” he said. “You can’t cut staff and funding, then expect to win battles over IUU. It’s nonsensical.”

Much of that work is done under NOAA’s Seafood Import Monitoring Program to screen for illegally harvested fish and the Interagency Working Group on IUU fishing that investigates, enforces and prosecutes such activity.

In 2022, NOAA oversaw 36 enforcement missions resulting in sanctions, penalties and fines against the owners of vessels flagged in Mexico, Taiwan, the Gambia and other countries, according to agency reports submitted to Congress last year.

The former official who has participated in international fisheries negotiations said those actions would not have succeeded without treaty frameworks that level the playing field for all fishermen.

The directive also comes as international fisheries are taking on greater geopolitical importance. Russia, for example, has used warships to push U.S. fishermen out of contested international waters in Alaska. Conflicts between U.S. and Canadian lobstermen along the [maritime border with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick](#) have grown more tense as lobster populations migrate north toward cooler water as climate change warms ocean habitats off the U.S. Atlantic coast.

And fast-boat “lanchas” owned by Mexican fishing cartels are poaching millions of dollars’ worth of red snapper and sharks from U.S. waters in the Gulf of Mexico, which the Trump administration recently changed to Gulf of America. The poaching has drawn fire from lawmakers, such as Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who has likened the lancha runs to drug smuggling and human trafficking. Interdictions by U.S. Coast Guard and Texas authorities are rising, according to official tallies.

Experts say none of these threats will be ameliorated by severing communication with international partners.

“It’s just like any other kind of relationship. If somebody stops communicating, you aren’t going to get much done,” said Kristina Alexander, endowed chair for marine policy and law at the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. The institute operates under a tri-national partnership with researchers in Mexico and Cuba.

The directive comes as NOAA has also been dealing with other changes under the Trump administration. The agency was [one of the first to be visited](#) by representatives of the so-

called Department of Government Efficiency overseen by billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk.

Former officials have also said that staffers are being told the Trump administration could seek to [halve the agency's workforce](#) from roughly 12,000 to 6,000 employees.

Those actions have drew sharp [criticism from congressional Democrats](#), who have charged DOGE officials with overstepping legal boundaries and questioned if the administration would disrupt valuable programs like the National Weather Service.

One former official said since last week, NOAA personnel have been told that they can “answer emails, but there is still a lot of uncertainty and anxiety.”

So far, people at U.S.-based organizations that conduct NOAA-funded research said they have not heard of any impact on their work.

“We’re keeping a close eye on this, we just don’t know yet how it’s going to play out,” said Kesley Banks, an associate research scientist at the Harte working to calculate losses of red snapper to illegal fishing by Mexican lanchas.

“It really depends on the administration’s overall direction in terms of what the limitations are,” she added, noting that NOAA is one of several federal sources of research and education funding at Harte.

Other major research institutes that work closely with NOAA and also international partnerships are the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego.

Spokespeople for both Scripps and Wood Hole said they are unaware of any changes that affect them.

Holly Doremus, a professor of environmental regulation and co-director of the Law of the Sea Institute at UC Berkeley, noted that NOAA plays an important role in international partnerships.

The United States “needs to be an active participant in implementation of the recent High Seas Treaty, in regional fishery management organizations and in global efforts to combat IUU fishing if those efforts are to be effective,” Doremus said. “That cooperation seems far more likely to come from fisheries experts in multiple nations working together than from the kind of trade bullying Trump has threatened in other contexts.”