



NATIONAL IMMIGRATION FORUM

Statement for the Record

U.S. Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee Hearing on

“Fencing Along the Southwest Border”

April 4, 2017

The National Immigration Forum (Forum) advocates for the value of immigrants and immigration to the nation. Founded in 1982, the Forum plays a leading role in the national debate about immigration, knitting together innovative alliances across diverse faith, law enforcement, veterans, labor and business constituencies in communities across the country. Coming together under the Forum’s leadership, these alliances develop and advocate for legislative and administrative policy positions. Through our policy expertise and work with diverse constituencies, the Forum works to uphold America’s long-standing tradition as a nation of immigrants and build public support for comprehensive immigration reform, sound border security policies, balanced enforcement of immigration laws, and ensuring that new Americans have the opportunities, skills and status to reach their full potential.

Introduction

The National Immigration Forum thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide its views on the matter of fencing and border security along the Southwest Border. While it is important to have effective barriers that promote safety along the Southwest Border, leading national security officials agree that having a 21st century immigration system that promotes safety and security, benefits American workers and our economy, and provides earned legalization for otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants would have the most significant impact in promoting security at our borders.ⁱ We urge the members of the Committee to address the on-going need to fix our broken and out-of-date immigration system.

We also urge the members of the Committee to consider the economic and cultural bridges that allow the Southwest Border region to thrive. The United States and Mexican border states together represent the world’s 4th largest economy, with more than \$500 billion in bilateral trade a year.ⁱⁱ Nearly six million jobs in the United States depend directly on trade with Mexico.ⁱⁱⁱ From its people to its economy, the Southwest Border region depends on bridges, not walls. We must choose policies that keep us safe, but that also facilitate trade, tourism and the economic health of the United States.

Finally, we fully support effective barriers along our borders where necessary to keep our country safe, but a border wall is not the only solution. Congress should explore other equally effective but less costly measures to complement a border wall. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that building a wall spanning the entire Southwest Border would cost about \$21.6 billion, though other estimates put the figure as high as \$31.2 billion just to build.^{iv} It would also cost additional billions of dollars to maintain over the next ten years.^v

Congress should also consider the views of people who live in the border regions. Residents in the Southwest Border know that their area is one of the safest regions in the country.^{vi} Research has shown that 72 percent of border community residents in the United States oppose the construction of a wall.^{vii} Some residents and experts have expressed opposition to a wall because of its significant cost to taxpayers,^{viii} its damaging environmental and cultural impact,^{ix} and the imposition it would pose on private property owners who live along the border and have owned their land for generations.^x As San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer noted on January 25, 2017, his city already “[has] a safe and secure border... [and has] strong economic and cultural binational ties.”^{xi} We can continue to secure and enforce our borders while remaining a welcoming nation by choosing policies that are thoughtful, effective, and improve border management.

Build Fencing Where Needed

The Border Patrol identified a total of 652 miles of the Southwest Border in 2011 as operationally necessary for fencing and barriers.^{xii} By 2015, the United States had built border fencing along 653 miles of the Southwest Border, including 353 miles of primary pedestrian fencing, 300 miles of vehicle fencing, 36 miles of secondary fencing behind the primary pedestrian fencing and 14 miles of tertiary pedestrian fencing behind the secondary fence.^{xiii} Constructing a wall or fence along the entire 2,000 miles of the Southwest Border region is not cost effective. A one-size fits all solution for a diverse region, which runs along riverbanks, through remote deserts, marshlands, and hill country will not work. Furthermore, building a fence along the entire Southwest Border would require the government to pay for miles of private land,^{xiv} particularly in Texas, that have been owned by families for generations and to obtain agreements from American Indians to access reservations.^{xv} Already, the cost of building a wall along the Southwest Border is expected to range from \$21.6 billion to \$31.2 billion, not including the cost of maintaining the wall and other physical barriers over the years.^{xvi}

Another reason a 2,000 mile wall or fence is not cost-effective is because the number of apprehensions at the border has dropped from about 1.6 million in FY 2000 to less than 416,000 in FY 2016.^{xvii} This reduction represents a 75 percent decrease and is the lowest number of apprehensions since at least FY 1971.^{xviii} Furthermore, on March 8, 2017, Secretary Kelly announced that border crossings along the Southwest border have fallen an additional 40 percent between January and February 2017.^{xix} The drop is a continuation of the downward trend in border crossings that started in FY 2009. Between FY 2009 and FY 2014, the net migration to the United States from Mexico was negative with more people leaving and going to Mexico than entering the U.S. During this time, approximately 140,000 more Mexican immigrants decided to leave the U.S. for Mexico than came and stayed in the U.S.^{xx} As the number of people crossing the border dropped, the amount spent by the Border Patrol per apprehension at the border increased almost 1,300 percent from \$630 per apprehension in FY 2000 to over \$8,760 per apprehension in FY 2016.^{xxi} Investing in a wall or fencing along the Southwest border will not provide significant returns on border security because the number of people attempting to enter the United States is trending down.

Congress should provide funding to build a fence in the Southwest Border only where the use or placement of such a barrier is the most appropriate solution and fencing has not already been built. It is also important that Congress provide DHS with the discretion, after consultation with local communities, to determine whether a fence or wall is the most appropriate option to secure any area of the border. Border Patrol agents have stated that a fence, not a wall, is preferred, so that they can see the other side of the border and see *who* is on the other side to keep safe from criminals throwing rocks or armed with other weapons.^{xxii} For those areas DHS does not deem appropriate for fencing, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) can attain

operational control of the border areas through the use of its current Border Patrol agents, which are at an all-time high at 21,370 Border Patrol agents,^{xxiii} and modern technology.

Establish a Virtual Fence Where Effective

CBP relies heavily on technology in order to secure the United States' borders and ports of entry. In 2015, CBP had at least 273 remote video surveillance systems with day and night cameras deployed on the Southwest Border.^{xxiv} In addition, the agency used 49 mobile surveillance systems, which are truck-mounted infrared cameras and radar.^{xxv} CBP also has applied mobile surveillance systems, remote video surveillance systems, thermal imaging systems, radiation portal monitors and license plate readers in the Southwest Border and operates at least 10 Predator B unmanned aerial drones, which provide surveillance of the border along Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.^{xxvi} Congress should continue to support CBP's use of modern technology to build a virtual fence in areas on the Southwest Border in which a physical barrier is not the most appropriate solution to secure the border.

Provide the Border Patrol with Greater Access and Visibility

Another step to ensure safety at our borders is to eradicate the invasive and nonnative Carrizo cane and salt cedar plants along the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, which would provide the Border Patrol with greater visibility and access to the Rio Grande.^{xxvii} As border communities residents like Dennis E. Nixon, the CEO of International Bank of Commerce in Laredo, Texas, have noted, the density of the Carrizo cane and salt cedar plants allows the plants to become a hiding place for immigrants and criminals who unlawfully enter the United States and, in that process, makes the Border Patrol and other law enforcement agents vulnerable to criminal groups.^{xxviii}

These plants, which cover between 30,000 and 60,000 acres, must be removed from the riverbanks and re-populated with native prairie grasses that have limited growth potential and can be easily and economically maintained. Estimates indicate that it would cost approximately \$200,000 to remove 700 acres of the Carrizo cane and salt cedar plants. The total cost to remove up to 60,000 acres of cane would be approximately \$17.1 million.^{xxix} Once the Carrizo cane and salt cedar plants are eradicated, the Border Patrol will have access to patrol the riverbank and full view of the area. Furthermore, the Border Patrol's visibility of the riverbank can be enhanced with more investments in modern technology: motion detectors, cameras, and infrared sensors. Unlike a wall or obstructive fence, which would limit physical access to the riverbanks and block Border Patrol agents' visibility, eradicating the Carrizo cane and salt cedar plants is a faster, more affordable and more effective approach to patrol and control the Rio Grande. This approach grants Border Patrol agents the physical access and visibility to protect the border.



A Border Patrol agent makes his way along the Carrizo cane in the U.S.-Mexico border. Source: Courtesy of Reynaldo Leanos Jr., Texas Standard: <http://www.texasstandard.org/stories/this-invasive-species-is-a-threat-to-national-security/>.

Invest in Personnel and Infrastructure at Ports of Entry (POEs)

CBP Office of Field Operations (OFO), which oversees the flow of commerce and immigrants at all 328 ports of entry in the United States, is understaffed. CBP OFO plays a critical role in the economic health and national security of our country. In FY 2016, CBP OFO welcomed more than 1 million travelers each day – or 390 million for the year - and processed a total of nearly \$2.3 trillion in trade and more than 27 million cargo containers.^{xxx} Yet, through FY 2014, CBP OFO identified a shortage of 3,811 OFO officers.^{xxxii} The magnitude of the shortage is amplified by the fact that adding a single OFO officer to a port of entry would result in annual benefits of a \$2 million increase in our country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), \$640,000 saved in opportunity costs and 33 jobs added to the economy.^{xxxiii}

We also need to invest in infrastructure at our ports of entry. The revenue gained from trade at the border generates jobs for Americans – nearly six million American jobs depend directly on trade with Mexico.^{xxxiv} Yet, wait times to cross the border are often long, sometimes up to a 55 minute delay for commercial vehicles,^{xxxv} which can detract from commerce and lead to billions of dollars in spoiled goods and opportunity cost. Furthermore, research shows that because enforcement resources have been so focused *between* ports of entry, processing *at* ports of entry is often lacking. Individuals entering the United States without documentation through a land port have only about a 1 in 4 chance of being apprehended, compared to 90 percent for those entering between ports of entry.^{xxxvi} The understaffing also leaves land ports more susceptible to transnational drug, weapons and human smuggling. We believe that investment at our ports of entry, including in personnel and infrastructure, is an important aspect of border security and management.

Develop New Border Security Metrics

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) needs to adopt transparent metrics to measure border security. The lack of metrics has greatly contributed to the lack of clarity surrounding our nation's border security and dissemination of resources at the border. This has made it difficult for Congress to hold the agency accountable and to know what additional resources are needed, or perhaps not needed, to secure the Southwest Border. Congress must direct CBP to establish measures that assess achievement and progress at the border by *moving away* from input measures, such as how many Border Patrol agents are stationed on the border or how many people are apprehended at the border every year, and *into* outcome measures, such as the probability, or rate, of apprehension at the border and at-the-border deterrence rate.^{xxxvi} Because input measures consist of the resources that are put into a process in order to achieve a goal, CBP needs to develop and use outcome measures to better assess achievement and progress at the border over time. This way, Congress will know how best to allocate resources at the border in order to achieve true border security.

Conclusion

The National Immigration Forum looks forward to working with the Committee to bring our immigration system up to 21st century standards. We thank the Committee for holding this hearing and considering the best policies to secure and enforce our borders while facilitating trade, tourism and the economic health of the United States. We support fencing or other barriers on the Southwest Border where appropriate. CBP has already built fencing or other physical barriers on the areas that they have determined are operationally necessary. We also support other policies that are thoughtful, effective, and improve border management, including investment in modern technology at the border, providing Border Patrol agents with greater access and visibility, investments at ports of entry and developing new border security metrics. In conclusion, one of the most important aspects to ensuring that our borders are secure is to pass legislation that would create a [21st-century immigration system](#).

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ⁱⁱ Alcocer, Sergio M., "Managing the Mexico-U.S. Border: Working for a More Integrated and Competitive North America," *The Anatomy of a Relationship: A Collection of Essays on the Evolution of U.S.-Mexico Cooperation on Border Management*, Wilson Center Mexico Institute (June 2016): 25, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/anatomy_border_evolution_us_mexico_cooperation.pdf .

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Edwards Ainsley, Julia, "Exclusive – Trump Border 'Wall' To Cost \$21.6 Billion, Take 3.5 Years To Build: Internal Report," Reuters (February 9, 2017): <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-immigration-wall-exclusive-idUSKBN15O2ZN> . Nowrasteh, Alex, "A Tax on Remittances Won't Pay for a Border Wall," CATO Institute (January 24, 2017): <https://www.cato.org/blog/tax-remittances-wont-pay-border-wall> .

^v Bier, David, "A Wall is an Impractical, Expensive, and Ineffective Border Plan," CATO Institute (November 28, 2016): <https://www.cato.org/blog/border-wall-impractical-expensive-ineffective-plan> .

^{vi} Aguilar, Julian and Alexa Ura, "Border Communities Have Lower Crime Rates," The Texas Tribune (February 23, 2016): <https://www.texastribune.org/2016/02/23/border-communities-have-lower-crime-rates/> .

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