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As Secretary Salazar Visits Border, Dept. of Interior Must Stop Obstructing Border Patrol

DOI's actions contribute to environmental damage, terrorist threats, human trafficking, drug smuggling

WASHINGTON, D.C. – On Saturday, March 13, 2010, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar will briefly tour Organ Pipe National Monument, located along Arizona's southern border. While there, Secretary Salazar must answer as to why the Department of the Interior (DOI) is using environmental regulations to hinder U.S. Border Patrol from securing our border on federal lands. As a result of DOI's actions, this federal land has become a highway for terrorists, criminals, drug smugglers, and human traffickers who endanger American lives and cause severe environmental damage.

Today, National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee Ranking Member Rob Bishop (UT-01) is challenging Secretary Salazar to immediately implement four policy changes to address this problem:

- 1.) End DOI's requirement that the Department of Homeland Security [DHS] must negotiate access and seek permission before entering DOI lands to enforce the law and secure the border.
- 2.) Acknowledge that DOI policies have contributed to severe environmental damage and destruction by hampering the DHS from fully doing their job and stopping well-organized criminal, drug and human traffickers and potential terrorists from crossing the border through protected natural areas.
- 3.) Stop impeding Border Patrol access to public lands, including Wilderness areas, for the purpose of siting and building electronic surveillance.
- 4.) End the DOI practice of extorting "mitigation" funds from the DHS. Money appropriated for border security should only be spent on making our borders more secure, and not diverted to unrelated DOI spending projects.

"On a recent visit to the southern Arizona border, I toured some of the most prevalent trafficking routes carved into federal lands by drug smugglers and human traffickers. I saw firsthand the destruction being done to the land. I remain concerned that our national security is jeopardized on a daily basis solely because of the DOI's restrictive

environmental regulations. It is clear that immediate action must be taken, which is why I have requested that Secretary Salazar take immediate action to ensure that our Border Patrol has the access and resources necessary to apprehend and deter dangerous criminals entering illegally into the U.S. through federal lands,” said Congressman Bishop.

[Click here to view Bishop’s remarks regarding Salazar’s four challenges](#)



Background information on each of the four challenges:

Challenge # 1: Stop blocking Border Patrol access to federal lands.

Documents show that the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service have consistently and actively taken steps that prevent the Border Patrol from securing our nation’s borders on federal lands. According to internal memos, DOI officials have asserted that the Wilderness Act of 1964 trumps border security legislation passed by Congress.

As a result, Border Patrol agents are being forced to wade through bureaucratic red tape just so they can do the job Congress has mandated: gain operational control over the U.S. border.

The Department of the Interior is hindering border security efforts on federal lands by preventing the use of motorized vehicles, requiring DHS to complete lengthy and expensive environmental analysis, and at times literally locking out Border Patrol agents to prevent their access to some areas.

Challenge #2: Admit DOI’s action contribute to environmental damage and security threats.

Although DOI's stated goal is to protect the environment, its obstruction of the Border Patrol's enforcement operations is actually resulting in increased environmental harm because criminal trafficking operations are drawn to areas where border enforcement is hampered. These Wilderness areas suffer from mounds of discarded trash, dumping of toxic waste, destruction of plants, soil erosion and wildfires started by criminal cartels.

Federal lands along the border are specifically targeted by criminals, drug smugglers, human traffickers and even terrorists because they are remote, uninhabited and less frequently patrolled by Border Patrol agents.

According to DOI's FY 2002 Public Lands Threat Assessment Report:

"Virtually all of the lands managed by Department Of The Interior (DOI) along the Arizona/Mexico border are sparsely populated with easy access into the United States from Mexico. Terrorist wishing to smuggle nuclear - biological - or chemical (NBC) weapons into the United States from Mexico could use well-established smuggling routes over DOI managed lands."

National Parks and National Forests have become some of the most dangerous and violent areas along the border where shootings, robberies, rapes, murders, kidnappings and car-jackings frequently occur. Many of these areas have been rendered unsafe for entry by U.S. citizens, including land managers and employees.

Challenge #3: Stop blocking the construction and siting of electronic surveillance.

Security infrastructure enhancements, such as SBInet towers with long range cameras and sensors, are prohibited in wilderness areas regardless of the strategic importance of their placement. SBInet (also known as the virtual fence) seeks to provide a "common operating picture" of the border. Barring towers from needed sites in Wilderness areas will leave large sections of the border unmonitored. According to a recent GAO report, environmental delays have significantly delayed implementation of this project.

Challenge #4: End the DOI practice of extorting "mitigation" funds from the DHS.

Not only is DOI blocking efforts to secure the border, but it is even charging DHS money in order to conduct border patrol operations on its land. DHS has paid DOI over \$9 million since 2007 to mitigate the purported "environmental damage" of protecting our border. Per a Memorandum of Agreement signed in 2009, DHS agreed to hand over an additional \$50 million for mitigation funds to DOI; however DOI has yet to disclose how exactly these funds will be used.

This extortion is taking valuable money away from border patrol that is needed to safeguard our nation.

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