

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE

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Committee on Resources

REGARDING

"The Importance of Border Security on Federal Lands"

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Chairman Pombo and members of the committee, it is an absolute honor and privilege to appear before you today to discuss the importance of the presence of federal law enforcement agencies and increased border security efforts on federal lands.

My name is Carolyn Powers, and I am an equestrian and a long standing border resident and community activist. I have two daughters and two grandchildren to which I would like to pass along the legacy of a safe, sane and clean environment who live in and use the lands near the U.S./Mexican border.

The issues I have been involved with these last 15 years have included border security and sovereignty, recreational safety, wastewater collection and treatment facilities, water quality, availability and flood prevention in the Tijuana/San Diego area with emphasis on the Tijuana River Valley.

In 1992 we started a political watch group, CARE, formed to monitor and improve conditions affecting border infrastructure, parklands and recreational access. We have hosted issue-oriented meetings for the Public, as needed, to address specific problem areas. I have educated legislators and their staff concerning border issues and agencies. I used to give a two day post election "classroom" for new community reps including a horseback tour of the Tijuana River Valley. You know the rap... " ..but just what is an IBWC? "

I am a fund raiser for The Water Station, a volunteer oriented group dedicated to saving lives in the California-Arizona deserts by placing water at strategic locations. No Politics...just humanitarian kindness.

I am here now to talk to you about life as it exists today along the US-Mexican border and the threats we suffer due to illegal immigration and terrorist activities due to our highly permeable border.

The Tijuana River Valley has a history rich in diversity that has ranged from the Kumeyaay Indians clamming and fishing through the summer months along our beaches, explorations by Hernan Cortes and conquistador Juan Cabrillo through the spreading of the gospel according to Fr. Junipero Serra (in 1769) and Fr. Kino.

Representing the dark side of the sieve-like stretch of land considered our national border, we have suffered rum runners during Prohibition, drug smugglers since the 60s and a constant stream of "coyotes" (smugglers) and "pollos" (undocumented immigrants) streaming across our borders.

Criminal acts such as rape, robbery and murder have impacted those border areas such as Smugglers Gulch, Goat Canyon, Campos Ditch, the Soccer Field and Spooner Mesa. Due to the persistence of "Light Up the Border" advocate Muriel Watson, the exposure given same by ex-mayor and conservative talk show host, Roger Hedgecock and the resolve of Congressman Duncan Hunter most of the border between the San Diego/Tijuana crossing and the Pacific is now lit up, decreasing the frequency and amount of the criminal activities.

Prior to "Operation Gatekeeper" in the 1990s, it was not at all unusual to encounter 80-100 immigrants running down our equestrian trails. I was more often than not riding alone when encountering the northbound illegal immigrants. After Gatekeeper activities had begun, there were often Border Patrol agents in hot pursuit. Gatekeeper was characterized by high concentrations of agents working the border itself.

My horse tended to spook with the activities and the smell of fear in the air. In order to counter this reaction I learned to say " carrot " in Spanish and started to stop the runners and asked them to please feed my horse a carrot (I would hand them carrots), first in Spanish to the immigrants, then in English to the Border Patrol. Pretty soon, instead of spooking, when disturbed on the trail, my horse would beg for the carrots she had learned to expect.

The pollos have been relatively subservient in their demeanor when encountered on the trail, stepping back to allow our passage, but the smugglers are not. A typical group of 6 to 8 hard looking men burdened with identical backpacks, tattooed tears on their cheeks (denoting prison time) and a bad attitude would block the trail and wait for me to apologetically request passage. When I would acquiesce, they would nod their heads as if reluctantly considering allowing me to pass and finally nod their heads indicating that I could ride around them. It was pretty frightening and actually grossly insulting to have occurring on U.S. Soil.

We used to joke about the trails in the Tijuana River Valley all being north-south trails. Most of the trails ran through farms, estuaries, ranches or residences avoiding the streets and the waiting Border Patrol. Congressman Bilbray can tell you about the time his old lifeguard skills were called upon when he and his family were woken in the middle of the night by screams from his backyard. When he investigated, he found that a Mexican family had jumped the fence and fallen into his swimming pool. They couldn't swim, so Congressman Bilbray to the Rescue.

Many residents' tales didn't have such happy endings. Immigrants startled a quarter horse worth \$40,000 in a valley rim ranch and the horse bolted, caught it's leg on some fencing and needed to be put down to end it's suffering. Another unlucky property owner was successfully sued by an immigrant who his dog had bitten as he trespassed on his property in the middle of the night.

Vendors used to sell plastic trash bags for a dollar apiece to use as boots to cross the Tijuana River. Every day the bags were collected by workmen paid by the County of San Diego and every morning there would be another mountain of plastic waiting on the north side of the river.

There is also the cost of medical care to illegal immigrants that is shouldered by County governments. Resources that should provide a safety net to U.S. Citizens are inadequate in border states due to the hit taken by those counties from our neighbors coming north to have their babies , collect welfare and treat their infirmities. Passing laws against illegal immigration does not enforce those laws. The Border Patrol does.

Throughout the north of the border zone there are inordinate signs of illegal trespass. The infamous north/south trails, frequently traveling through sensitive habitat, are littered with plastic bottles, disposable diapers, clothing and human excrement. In the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve there is an area that used to be called " Underwear Point " due to the castoff muddy clothing littering the estuary. The estuary itself is scarred with trails that will take years to revegetate, even though American citizens would be cited and fined for just being caught there. This is an environmentally sensitive area regarded nationwide as being a prime breeding site for fisheries and endangered wildlife alike.

The recent "Horse fire" in San Diego County which has razed over 17,000 acres is believed by fire investigators to have been the result of a campfire built by the immigrants and not extinguished. I was on alert for days lining up transportation and boarding facilities for friends and their animals. One of my very favorite trails, Horsethief Canyon has been totally wiped out by the fire. We continue to endure brush and forest fires regularly that have been set by coyotes to divert the Border Patrol .

A few years ago, when I was preparing to write a comment on an environmental impact report about making improvements to some access and patrol roads on BLM lands adjacent to the border in the Otay Mesa area, I requested a ride-a-long with a patrolling Border Patrol agent. There were individuals, NGOs and agencies that were contesting the plans to make the rutted dirt roads safer with grading plus regularly scheduled maintenance. The agent and I began our drive east of the Tijuana border crossing and ended up on Otay Lakes Road close to a popular camping site. I mentioned to the agent that I was used to riding my horse on long trail rides so that other than being cautious around cliffs (I do have a fear of heights) for him to carry on with his patrol as usual. The next day, I ended up with blood in my urine and a bump on the head from bouncing so hard that my head was hitting the vehicle roof, even with my seat belt in place. My ride only lasted 2 hours while normally, agents are patrolling for 4-6 hours a day. Efforts to improve border conditions would far exceed any negative impact that these activities may have on environmentally sensitive areas.

Tijuana is the most violent Mexican cartel-oriented border city in Mexico. We are now plagued with a new kind of border violence. Beheadings are not just reserved for the terrorist activities abroad. This vile act has become part of the drug cartel scene in Baja California and there has been a recent discovery of a headless body in Smugglers Gulch at the border. This reprehensible sight should not be tolerated for the sake of not only ourselves, but more brutally, our children and grandchildren who also ride these trails regularly.

Equally important is the killing of innocent civilians, government officials, and law enforcement officers, robberies, assaults, kidnappings, and extortion, which is becoming an all too familiar scenario in many cities just south of our border. Many of the criminal entities and organized crime syndicates responsible for these types of heinous acts are known to operate on both sides of the border and the lives of innocent Americans are increasingly being placed in jeopardy.

This is U.S. Soil and we should not have to endure fear and danger while being or recreating near our borders.

When funding became available for the manpower required to implement " Operation Gatekeeper " in the 90s, illegal border passage decreased greatly. Gatekeeper required, however, consistent and expensive budgetary considerations to keep it going successfully. The operation was dependent upon a high number of Border Patrol agents maintaining visual and audible contact with each other across the stretch of border to be controlled. The Gatekeeper era became the safest period to recreationalists in many years.

The funding available for Border Patrol operations has proven to be extremely variable. I remember some years when agents were coming in to work on their vehicles on their days off because money was not available for mechanics. Because living expenses are so high, especially in California, many agents would leave their employment shortly after costly training, to work for other law enforcement agencies where they were paid more. The attrition rate has been deplorable. It has resulted in a higher percentage of arrogant, empowered smugglers on our trails and considerably more traffic in the U.S..

Where infrastructure has been installed at the border, crime rates have decreased, in some areas as much as 80%. Complaints about illegal crossers running through neighborhoods have decreased and overall community safety has increased.

Apprehension numbers in the San Diego Sector have dropped more than 75% from a high of over 500,000 per year in 1995 to less than 130,000 per year in 2005. The installation of the primary fence has almost eliminated vehicle drive throughs and high speed pursuits at the border.

Electronic camera and satellite surveillance, border lights, vibration detection sensors , a strong, safe border fence and a few additional agents should be prerequisites in, at least ,high traffic areas. I realize that this isn't the answer to all of the problems associated with illegal immigration, but it is a step in the right direction and as citizens of the U.S. we need our government to protect us.

The all too recent terrorist activities of 9-11 should be strong reminders of just how vulnerable our Mexican borders really are. It is important that we take very seriously the ever-growing threat of terrorism and also recognize that individuals from other parts of this world would do harm to innocent Americans if they were only able to gain entry into the United States.

Without infrastructure in the border area of the Tijuana Estuary, the County Regional Park or the State Park, any trails or recreational plans will place users at a significant risk for criminal activity, robberies, assaults, theft and rapes. Infrastructure in the area south of the Tijuana Estuary will reduce the law enforcement operational footprint from almost 5,000 acres to about 200 plus acres. This will deter the uncontrolled foot traffic through the estuary, helping to protect the sensitive environment, and making it safe for recreational users of the park system.

We remember when it was not safe for motorists to drive down interstate 5 because of high numbers of illegal crossers walking or running in the median of an interstate highway. Billboards warning traffic along the freeway depicted families holding hands and running across the road.

The men and women of U.S. Border Patrol, who are responsible for securing our borders between the ports of entry and protecting the lives of Americans, understand how grave the consequences may be if they fail to get it right every single time and the adversary gets it right only once. If more isn't done to secure our borders, then our generation needs to be prepared to accept responsibility for placing the future of this great nation in a precarious and potentially unmanageable position.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today and look forward to responding to any questions you might have.