

Statement of

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Field Oversight Hearing: Border Security on Federal Lands: What can be done to mitigate impacts along the Southwestern Border

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss the importance of border security on Bureau of Land Management (BLM)-managed Federal lands in California. I would first like to point out that the Administration supports comprehensive immigration reform that increases border security, establishes a robust interior enforcement program, creates a temporary worker program, and addresses the problem of the estimated 11 to 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country.

I am the District Manager, California Desert District, and am responsible for the management of nearly 11 million acres of public land in the southern California counties of Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego. The California Desert District is divided into five BLM field offices: Barstow, El Centro, Needles, Palm Springs/South Coast, and Ridgecrest.

Two of those field offices – El Centro and Palm Springs – manage approximately 3.3 million acres that are within the borderland zone, roughly within 100 miles of the United States border with Mexico. These Federal lands include Wilderness Areas, National Register cultural sites, and other special designations.

Our mandate from Congress through the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 is to manage the public lands for multiple uses and to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of these lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The range of activities on the public lands managed by the BLM is as diverse as the land itself. Responsible stewardship means the BLM must balance multiple and potentially conflicting uses, including increased demands for recreation and energy production, while protecting sensitive resources. Given the proximity of many of these lands to the international border and the environmental degradation caused by illegal immigration across these lands, border security, as I will further explain, plays a critical role in helping us manage and protect these valuable resources.

My testimony today will focus on recent and on-going cooperative efforts to address illegal border crossings in southern California and the impact illegal immigration has had on the public lands in the region. A brief overview of past illegal immigration impacts to public lands resources along the border will help clarify and provide a context for the current management situation.

In October 1994, the U.S. Border Patrol initiated Operation Gatekeeper, increasing interdiction efforts (including improved fencing, additional agents, and patrols) in southwestern San Diego County. Because Federal lands along the border, for the most part, are remote and isolated areas, they became a popular route for illegally entering the United States. The rugged terrain of Otay Mountain was once thought to present a natural barrier to illegal immigrants seeking access routes east of San Diego. However, illegal traffic across public lands dramatically increased throughout the 1990's, resulting in serious environmental impacts. By June 1996, over 300 wildfires caused by campfires of illegal immigrants posed a significant threat to human safety and natural resources. Illegal immigration also resulted in increased impacts to soils, vegetation, cultural sites, and other sensitive resources.

In response to this crisis situation, the first of three formal interagency, cooperative efforts to address the dual missions of

border security and natural resource management was established. The Border Agency Fire Council (BAFC) was formed during the 1996 fire season with the goal of saving lives and property. The BAFC is now made up of 42 organizations, including local, State, and Federal fire protection, law enforcement, State and local legislators, Members of Congress, natural resource managers, and representatives of the U.S. State Department and the Republic of Mexico. The group meets every six to eight weeks and is currently chaired by the Fire Marshal of San Diego County.

The BLM took the lead for the BAFC in producing two videos and several public service announcements to discourage campfires and educate the public on fire safety and exposure. The BLM shot most of the footage and contributed \$25,000 to the California Association of Independent Commercial Producers to complete the project. The video was produced in both Spanish and English and distributed to media, schools, and various public institutions in the U.S. and Mexico.

Beyond the impacts of wildfires, resource problems occurred from trail and road damage, and litter left behind by groups and individuals crossing public lands as they entered the United States. Of special concern were the fragile resources on Otay Mountain – in Wilderness Study Area status during most of the 1990s – that were heavily impacted when illegal immigration moved east into that area. The Border Patrol and BLM joined with San Diego County and others to meet this threat. To further address the situation, in 1999, the Congress passed the Otay Mountain Wilderness Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-145), sponsored by Representative Brian Bilbray, which designated the 18,500-acre Otay Mountain Wilderness Area. This legislation balances important wilderness values with the need for law enforcement and border interdiction efforts that are necessary to curtail illegal immigration in the immediate area. The legislation recognized the land management need for Border Patrol, drug interdiction, and fire management authorities to continue to access the area, consistent with law, given the proximity of the area to the international border.

Beyond the resource issues posed by illegal immigration, the BLM is concerned about the number of immigrant deaths both at Otay Mountain and in the Imperial Desert, and the associated humanitarian and public safety concerns. In recent years, the Border Patrol has reported a steady increase in the number of deaths due to drowning in canals, dehydration, and exposure to the elements.

While the combined efforts of the Border Patrol, BLM, and other resource and law enforcement agencies resulted in a decrease in illegal immigration here in California, we have seen numbers rise again over the last three years as the infrastructure along the border in Arizona and elsewhere is put in place and border security is strengthened in those areas.

As a result, the threat and impacts to public land on the California border are once again increasing. Immigrant trails are increasingly being used, trash and human waste along these trails and at campsites is increasing, and escaped campfires lit by immigrants continue to be a major threat to wildlands along the border. The increased frequency of wildland fires is a primary issue for resource management along the border and is having a serious impact on our ability to sustain unique species, such as the Tecate Cypress found on Otay.

The BLM is committing more time and effort to the management of the public lands along the border. The BLM has increased its collaborative efforts by working with a multitude of agencies to provide for a more secure border and protection of natural resources.

In addition to the BAFC, a second formal collaborative effort of several State, Federal, and local government agencies is the Borderland Management Task Force (San Diego Chapter). The focus of this Task Force is to identify and discuss issues along the border in California, including environmental impacts of cross border traffic, access and infrastructure issues with Border Patrol, and public and employee safety concerns. The Task Force has been instrumental in expediting the implementation of infrastructure – such as fences, vehicle barriers, and remote cameras – along the border which serves the Border Patrol in carrying out their important border security mission. The BLM and the U.S. Border Patrol meet regularly to coordinate management decisions that might affect border operations, such as routes of travel, species habitat, and wilderness issues.

A special training program has also been developed for new and veteran Border Patrol agents developed by the BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, San Diego County, and the California Department of Fish and Game. In order to better manage the immigration issues now facing the Border Patrol and land managers, the training emphasizes local natural history, resource protection, agency missions and goals, the Endangered Species Act and the Wilderness Act, and low impact hiking skills. New Border Patrol agents receive this training, and refresher training is provided for senior agents and trainers. This training is being expanded to include newly assigned National Guard personnel joining in the border security effort.

The BLM and the U.S. Border Patrol have placed more than 100 signs warning migrants of the hazards associated with crossing the border illegally. The signs warn of the dangers from heat, fire, rugged mountains, drowning, and poisonous snakes.

The BLM law enforcement staff closely coordinates with the San Diego and Imperial County Sheriff's Departments to meet two major objectives: 1) to protect public land, resources and BLM facilities; and, 2) to maintain safe environments for public land users and BLM employees. When BLM law enforcement officers conduct routine patrols and provide information to visitors, their presence serves as a deterrent to illegal immigration. In addition, they provide support for volunteer groups and BLM employees conducting habitat restoration. They also assist with fire investigations and rescue stranded immigrants.

Due to the close proximity of the border to several major highways in the area (in one area the distance is less than 1,000 yards), illegal immigrant and drug trafficking is often intense. If these smugglers manage to reach the road, they often resort to excessive speed, driving without lights, or driving down the wrong side of the freeway to escape, resulting in vehicle accidents and serious injuries.

Vehicles that don't make it to the road are often damaged, resulting in fluid spills (gasoline, motor oil, radiator fluid, etc.) as well as hazardous objects (glass, torn sheet metal, etc.) that harm public land environments. Abandoned vehicles are often left in place and the burden for removing them falls on the BLM. If the vehicles are not removed quickly, they are often set afire by vandals, creating an even larger safety and environmental concern.

A third very important formal collaborative effort to address border security and resource management is the Department of the Interior's Border Field Coordinating Committee. The Field Coordinating Committee is made up of field representatives from the BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Reclamation, Minerals Management Service, National Park Service, U. S. Geological Survey, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as representatives from the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

The Field Coordinating Committee addresses natural and cultural resources protection and sustainable development in the border region. Partnerships and agreements with Mexico's Secretariat for the Environment and Natural Resources, National Institute of Anthropology and History, National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information, and other Mexican organizations have been fostered and maintained by the Field Coordinating Committee. These relationships have been invaluable in educating Mexican officials about the resource damages associated with illegal immigration, reinforcing the message that maintaining border security is a vital factor in protecting natural and cultural resources.

In conclusion, border security is extremely important in managing natural and cultural resources on public lands, and protecting the safety of public land users. In southern California, it is a shared responsibility and the BLM continues to work in close collaboration with a broad diversity of partners – and in cooperation with our Congressional delegation – to provide appropriate support to border security activities that assist us in meeting our resource protection mandate.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before the Committee today. I would be happy to answer any questions.