



**Testimony of Doña Ana County Sheriff Todd Garrison before the  
House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency**

**July 10, 2014**

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Barber and members of the committee, thank you for letting me speak with you today.

My name is Sheriff Todd Garrison. I am a certified law enforcement officer sworn to protect the citizens of Doña Ana County since I took office in 2005. I also serve as the Chairman of the Southwest Border Sheriffs' Association.

I come before you to illustrate a beautiful part of our country that I've called home since the day I was born, and for which I have been elected by my constituents to protect. Unfortunately – and in my opinion – the safety and welfare of the people in our part of the country is at risk following the President's designation of the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument.

Doña Ana County is where you will find some of the nation's most treasured assets. Some would call us an agricultural contradiction – a fertile desert that produces cotton, alfalfa, onions, cabbage and arguably the best green chile in the world. We are home to the pristine gypsum dunes at White Sands and the Camino Real, or the Royal

Highway upon which Don Juan de Oñate led a group of settlers during the Spanish Conquest in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We are also home to some of the most picturesque mountain ranges at the southernmost tip of the Rockies.

Those mountain ranges – the Organs, the Doña Anas, the Las Uvas, the Potrillos and the Robledos – are part of the newly designated Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument. I'm not before you today to dispute the value of those beautiful treasures to our generation and to future generations. I agree they should be protected. My testimony is how the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Office has protected this area from criminal activity along the border – something we've been doing day and night since 1852 – and how this designation is a very real threat, not only to what we are doing, but to our national security and the safety of the public.

In 2007, in response to an increase in cross-border criminal activity, the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Office created a task force dedicated to regular patrols of nearly 51 miles in Doña Ana County that skirt the U.S./Mexico border. It is a rugged, remote area that is extremely difficult to patrol. The conditions in that part of the desert are harsh on both personnel and equipment. One of our most valuable assets at our disposal is Operation Strongwatch (1), a mobile "eye in the sky" surveillance unit with night vision, GPS-position tracking and a six-mile camera range that has the capability to take both still photos and video recordings.



*(1) Operation Strongwatch is a mobile surveillance unit used to detect criminal border activity day and night.*

This task force has apprehended and documented several examples of what I've referred to as criminal border activity. We have intercepted mules (2), or individuals who use themselves as cargo carriers to transport illegal drugs from Mexico to the United States.



*(2) An example of a "mule" or smuggler who use themselves as cargo carriers in Doña Ana County.*

Our interdiction teams have made significant busts, arresting suspects who utilize the remote areas of our county because they think they are the roads less traveled (3).



*(3) This recent cache of marijuana was made near the newly-designated Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument, an area that has long been attractive to smugglers.*

They use whatever they can to get the job done – if not on their own person, disguised in bags (4) or in hidden compartments of their vehicles.



*(4) Bags filled with illegal narcotics are smuggled through the desert when suspects think they can go undetected.*

Aside from bringing drugs across the border, these transnational networks are also moving human cargo. Sometimes we discover the bodies of those who fell victim to the relentless elements of the desert.



*(5) Food supplies and clothing is often dumped in the desert when illegal aliens are transferred from one human smuggler to the next on their journey.*

Sometimes we just find evidence that they've been there, dumping their supplies along the way (5) and trading out traceable footwear for crude carpet shoes that allow them to go undetected through the desert. (6)



*(6) These carpet shoes were discovered by a Doña Ana County Sheriff's deputy on regular patrol near the U.S./Mexico border.*

Some of our discoveries are historic to the area. Part of our unique heritage is the fact that our deserts were once used as bombing ranges for target-practicing pilots of the World War II era. Unexploded ordnance can still be found in the area, as evidenced by our task force. (7,8)



*(7)*



(8)

All of this activity happens in the very area that is now federally-protected at a cost to national security – known as the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument. Most of you know this history of this issue. The current administration placed this project on priority status in 2009. Twice, New Mexico Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich brought the proposition to the people of Doña Ana County and the people rejected the idea. Twice legislation was introduced in Congress and twice it was voted down. Congressman Steve Pearce introduced legislation to protect the Organ Mountains (9) – which I completely supported – but the two senators went around the Organ Mountains Bill and straight to the President to over-rule the will of the people by deception to create the monument.



*(9) The Organ Mountains are an iconic symbol of the Mesilla Valley and Doña Ana County. Their protection has never been disputed by the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Office.*

Now, why do you think the two senators would do that? I've asked myself that same question countless times. I've tried asking them personally, extending an invitation for a guided tour of the area. The senators never took me up on that offer. In fact, they've never stepped foot in my office to discuss with me the mounting threats to public safety that this designation will create. They have essentially ignored it.

But what they haven't ignored are the scores of environmental groups that aggressively seek extra protections for federal lands along the U.S. Mexico border and the access interests of the transnational criminals that utilize drug and alien-smuggling corridors into the United States on federally-protected land – areas like the one contained in the President's newly-designated national monument in Doña Ana County. This so-called groundswell of support for the national monument was backed by U.S. Senators, State Representatives, county commissioners, the city mayor and city



council – some of which are employed by the Wilderness Alliance Group. Is there anyone here who wouldn't agree that taking a paycheck from an environmental group with an agenda is a conflict of interest?

Ironically, we've seen this type of land-grab before, just next door to us in Arizona, and it bears a similar name – the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. This vast area along the U.S. Mexico border in Arizona is now a haven for criminals. So much that signs greet park visitors warning them of the dangers that lurk in these federally-protected lands. (9)



*(9) Although the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona is open to the public, sightseeing and travel are heavily discouraged due to active drug smuggling, human trafficking and armed criminals within the federally-protected lands.*

This area sees much of the same cross-border activity that Doña Ana County does, but now on a much bigger scale (10) because of the federal protections U.S.

Government has given it. It's now caught the attention of the one faction of international commerce that needs minimally-patrolled areas to conduct their business – the Mexican cartels.



*(10) Arroyos in the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument have become littered with trash left behind by human smuggling networks.*

As we sit here today, one lone BLM ranger is tasked with patrolling and protecting the southern region of New Mexico. *One ranger.* How can anyone argue that one ranger can properly protect a monument of this size – in addition to what they are already patrolling? Both Senators Heinrich and Udall say they will continue to grant the sheriff's office access to patrol, but I can't honestly believe that to be true when neither one of them have given me the opportunity to discuss with them what's needed on the border to provide adequate protection if a national monument designation is made. And it's already been signed into law.

We cannot continue to rely on the past practices of the U.S. Government to predict future performance when it comes to national parks and monuments. As an

elected official who is accountable to my constituents, I have to ask this question for them: what segment of the population will this monument be available to – American citizens or Mexican cartels? The average person doesn't understand the very real – and very dangerous – implications of a national monument designation on the border.

By protecting this land by way of a national monument, we have essentially exposed the people of Doña Ana County and the rest of the nation to the pitfalls of criminal activity along the border, and this designation flies in the face of what the U.S. Government is already doing to secure the border – adding more Border Patrol agents along the U.S. Mexico border, and pumping millions of dollars in federal grant money to local law enforcement agencies like the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Office to put more patrols in the area to mitigate criminal activity.

National Monuments should be reserved for pristine, unfettered areas. This designation includes an area that is absolutely not pristine – it is rugged, remote, and brutal to anyone who is not familiar with harsh desert conditions. It doesn't fall into the quintessential Yellowstone/Yosemite/White Sands monuments. These areas within the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument have been used for ranching, recreation, and a bombing range. What are the criteria for a national monument? Are we meeting it? I don't think so.

As a New Mexico Sheriff, and the sitting Chair of the Southwest Border Sheriff's Association, I am going on record saying there appears to me a nexus between environmental groups aggressively seeking extra protections of these federal lands. We

have seen this in many of our wilderness or monument areas in California, Montana, and New Mexico – and in other states where people can go and hide from law enforcement. They have created clandestine drug-growing areas in these federal lands, posting criminals to protect their drug business from whoever comes their way. In my opinion, the ones who are benefitting the most from these areas we are protecting for our future generations are the transnational criminals who have learned to take advantage of the fact that these areas are remote, they are limited to vehicular traffic, and they are now at risk of becoming limited to local law enforcement that are sworn to protect it.

I thank you for your time and welcome any questions.