

Statement of Russell A. Johnson
New Mexico Border Rancher
Committee on Homeland Security
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Chairman Higgins, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, and Ranking Member Ivy, and distinguished Members of the subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Biden Administration's decision to stop border wall construction and the effect it has had on Americans like me who live and work on or near the southern border. It is an honor to share my story with you all today, but also disappointing that this issue still exists.

I would like to speak briefly about my background and my relationship with the border. I was born and raised in southern New Mexico on a cattle ranch that runs along the US/Mexico border for approximately 8.5 miles. This cattle ranch has been in my family since 1918. I am very familiar with all that happens along the border. My family has experienced very little good, but just about all the bad one can wish to experience regarding the border. My dad and uncle had a pickup stolen from them at gunpoint by young men who had been guarding a drug field in Mexico. We have had cattle thieves cross into the United States to steal our cattle and drive them into Mexico. My parents, uncles and cousins have all had their homes broken into by illegal immigrants. Property damage and trash left behind by illegal immigrants are also things that my family and I deal with.

I served 5 years in the United States Border Patrol as a Border Patrol Agent in El Paso, Texas. In my 5 years of service, I worked along the Rio Grande River as well as spent 2 years as a Supplemental Aircrew Member with Air and Marine Operations. I resigned from the Agency in 2016 in order to return to the family business, which was more conducive to raising a family. All my experience from where I grew up to my time served in the United States Border Patrol has given me a unique perspective on the border as I have seen it through the eyes of a stakeholder as well as a law enforcement officer.

Prior to 2008, our entire 8.5-mile section of border was nothing more than a 5-strand barbed wire fence that my family and I maintained at our expense. This fence was constantly damaged by illegal traffic crossing into the US. My family and I maintained the fence at our own expense because no government agency would accept responsibility for it. In 2008, Normandy style vehicle barrier was constructed and installed along roughly half of that 8.5 miles. This was an improvement over barbed wire, but did not deter vehicle drive-throughs, or human foot traffic. The remaining border was still barbed wire through the mountainous portion of our ranch. This left us vulnerable to illegal traffic, vehicle drive-throughs, not to mention the fact we still had to maintain the barbed wire fence which was serving as the international boundary line.

Fast forward to April 2020. I had been back on the family ranch for a little over three years after having resigned from my position with the United States Border Patrol. Border wall construction had begun on our neighbor's ranch and was coming east in our direction. Finally, a sense of security and relief from an open border was being provided. A large, 30-foot-tall concrete reinforced steel barrier, stadium style lighting and sensor technology that would provide Border Patrol agents real time data on attempted crossings was going to be erected in place of the barbed wire fence my family had been maintaining for over 100 years. This project came hot on the heels of the surge of traffic we had seen in 2019 when caravans had formed, and groups of illegal immigrants were giving themselves up en masse at Antelope Wells, New Mexico and other ports of entry.

As construction began on our family ranch, illegal traffic was pushed off our ranch and to areas without a border wall. No longer did we have to worry about vehicle drive-throughs and car chases through our ranch. Cattle theft by individuals from Mexico would be a thing of the past. The border wall system was going to be the force multiplier that Border Patrol needed to gain operational control of the southern border. All of that ended January 20, 2021.

As you know, when President Biden took office, one of his many executive orders was to halt border wall construction. Construction sure enough stopped on a dime. Not a screw was turning on the border. On our ranch unfortunately, the contractors hadn't finished installing all of the wall. We were left with a ¾ mile gap, one border monument access gate hadn't been installed and a few miles worth of wall had not been filled with concrete or the wall panels welded together.

Contractors working on the wall did not know what was going on, they were just told to stand down. This went on for several weeks with little to no information on what was going to happen. Construction equipment, materials and debris were scattered up and down the border through our ranch and on our neighbor's ranch. This is a good opportunity to explain how the United States government did not communicate with my family regarding wall construction.

The Roosevelt Reservation gives the Federal Government a 60-foot easement along the southern border in New Mexico, Arizona and California. This easement was established to keep public lands in the respective states free from obstruction for the purpose of border security. For this reason, my family and I were never approached by the federal government, nor given any information regarding wall construction. All information I received was from me reaching out to contractors or the United States Army Corps of Engineers working in our area.

Eventually, all the contractors were told to “make things safe” and remove all of their equipment. In doing so, wall panels were consolidated into two different areas, one on our ranch and the other on our neighbor’s ranch. Along with the wall panels, we were left with two different areas where rock crushers had been set up to crush gravel from pilings left over from wall construction in the mountains. Massive piles of gravel and rock remain in these two locations on our ranch. All of the above-mentioned locations on our ranch are on Bureau of Land Management land and my family owns the grazing lease on said land.

I mentioned earlier that I was disappointed that this was even an issue. What I have just mentioned regarding the material left behind is nothing new. This material has been sitting on pastureland all over the southern border for over 2 years. Taxpayer dollars are rusting away in stockpiles rather than being utilized for their intended use. Contractors are now telling my family that these wall panels are going to be hauled off for scrap. Brand new, American steel with all of the costs in getting that wall panel fabricated and it’s going to scrap. If anyone ran their business as inefficiently as the federal government has handled this wall project after the shutdown, they would be broke.

I have yet to mention the effect shutting the wall project down has had on illegal immigrant traffic. In the months leading up to January 2021, there was very little illegal traffic through our area. As soon as the wall was shut down, we immediately saw an increase in traffic. We continued to see this upward trend until Title 42 was taken away in May of this year. Though we did not see the surge of traffic like we expected to, Border Patrol Agents tell me that the traffic in my area is slow, but steady. Our government does not have operational control over the southern border. With very few Border Patrol Agents in the field, you will rarely see an agent on the border in our area. If you see an agent, they are further north chasing groups that have already made it several miles into the United States.

I have travelled over 2,000 miles to be here today. I left behind my wife, two young children, my parents and my business. Ranching on the US/Mexico border is not for the faint of heart. Every time I must leave, I fear what my wife and kids may encounter because of our open

border, and I'm not there to protect them. I often get asked, "Why don't you just move?" or "If it's so bad, I'd just pack up and leave." Maybe I'm crazy for not entertaining those two ideas, but the way I see it, I am an American. The last time I checked, I still live in the United States and therefore entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. All of which should be protected by my government who at this time is failing to do so.

In closing, I want to thank the committee for allowing me this opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.



Barbed Wire Fence serving as US/Mexico Boundary



Normandy Style Vehicle Barrier



$\frac{3}{4}$ mile gap over the mountain



Wall panels left behind near $\frac{3}{4}$ mile gap



Wall panels left behind on neighboring ranch



Large pile of rock to be crushed for gravel



Large group of illegal immigrants encountered while horseback