



TESTIMONY OF

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Sheriff
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For a Hearing

BEFORE

U.S. House of Representatives
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands

ON

“Federal Lands Amplified Security for the Homeland (FLASH) Act”

March 11, 2025
Washington, DC

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to participate in the discussion on the protection of federal lands along the United States and Mexico border. I am honored to represent the citizens of Terrell County and describe to you my experiences as a Texas Border Sheriff and United States Border Patrol Agent.

Other than my time in the United States Air Force and in Washington, D.C., while assigned to U.S. Border Patrol Headquarters, I've spent my entire life as both a resident and a U.S. Border Patrol Agent along the U.S./Mexico border. The last 11 years of my 26-year Border Patrol career were spent as the Patrol Agent in Charge of the Sanderson Border Patrol Station, which is also my hometown and where I am Sheriff.

Terrell County is located in the rugged, unforgiving, vast Big Bend Region of Texas and shares 54 miles of international border with Mexico. Terrell County is the 10th largest county in the State of Texas and encompasses almost 2,400 square miles. The Border Patrol Station there is responsible for 91 miles of border, this being the third largest portion of border by a Border Patrol Station along the entire U.S./Mexico border.

The Wild and Scenic Rio Grande River is 196 miles in length and runs the entire distance of Terrell County's southern boundary with Mexico. Big Bend National Park is located in Brewster County, which neighbors Terrell County to the west and is the 14th largest National Park in the United States.

Terrell County, does not have a crime problem, what we have is a Border Security problem. During the Presidency of Joe Biden, Terrell County like much of the Southwest Border, experienced a significant increase in illegal alien apprehensions; however, what occurred in Eagle Pass, Del Rio, El Paso, Lukeville and San Diego with masses of people crossing the border, did not happen in Terrell County. We experience illegal aliens who do not want to be apprehended nor give-up. When we encounter illegal aliens in the desert, they run. When we encounter illegal aliens smuggling loads on the highways, they lead us in high-speed pursuits before bailing out and absconding. High-speed pursuits occur with almost every illegal alien

smuggling load we encounter and it places both my team and American citizens, which I'm responsible for, in harm's way.

The next set of statistics I am going to share with you are the Sanderson Border Patrol Station fiscal year apprehension and gotaway percentages compared to fiscal year 2020. In fiscal year 2021 there was a 289% increase in illegal alien arrests and a 323% increase in gotaways. In fiscal year 2022, there was a 417% increase in illegal alien arrests and a 467% increase in gotaways. Fiscal year 2023, there was a decrease in apprehensions and gotaways, but it was still higher than the historical numbers with 189% increase in illegal alien arrests and 203% gotaways. Last fiscal year, we experienced activity in line with historical trends.

Citizens of Terrell County paid the price daily for the out-of-control Southwest Border. We do not have the financial, medical or emergency resources as many of the other larger communities affected by the activity along the border. Yet, the negative and detrimental results are the same. Valuable and costly emergency and medical resources are too often diverted to border security. In my county, landowners have to repair waterlines, fences and structures destroyed by illegal aliens crossing their properties, as well as the significant trash, human biohazard waste and erosion. Emergency medical services and law enforcement services have at times been unavailable due to responding to illegal aliens that are crossing the border.

There has been a total of 43 known deaths of illegal aliens attempting to cross my portion of the border over the last the four (4) years. Prior to the last four years, there was approximately one death a year of someone attempting to cross illegally. All but four of those deaths were from exposure due to the hot summer months as well as the cold winter fronts that come through Terrell County. Two others died in a vehicle pursuit, which resulted from a head-on collision.

Due to the amount of illegal alien smuggling activity coupled with the amount of vehicle pursuits we experienced since I took over as Sheriff, I wrote a letter to Governor Abbott of the State of Texas and requested additional resources to assist my office. Governor Abbott and I discussed the situation, and within a week, the additional resources I requested were deployed

to Terrell County. With assistance from the Operation Lone Star personnel and the U.S. Border Patrol, together we seized over 100 vehicles from illegal alien smugglers during the months of November and December 2022. Since then, we have observed a shift in tactics by smugglers and are not having the same level of activity in Terrell County.

You may be asking yourself, why is this information important to your committee? It's important because the first steps illegal aliens take entering the United States into my county is through the Wild and Scenic Rio Grande River. My county is approximately 175 miles upriver from Eagle Pass, Texas, a location where a string of buoys deployed by Governor Abbott was described as destroying the habitat for two rare species of freshwater mussels. I've been to those buoys, I've put my hands on them, and I can tell you they are not destroying the habitat. I can take you to an area in my county, one of the most remote locations on the U.S./Mexico border and show you remains of the Salina Mucket and Fawnsfoot freshwater mussels, the Biden Administration said were being destroyed. These mussels can be found along the edge of the Wild and Scenic Rio Grande River in a location where only illegal aliens wade or float across the border. The illegal aliens have a greater impact on the ecosystem than the buoys utilized by the State of Texas.

During my time as a U.S. Border Patrol Agent, I worked approximately 10 years in both Cochise and Santa Cruz Counties in Southern Arizona. These areas are rich in natural resources on federal lands within and around the Coronado National Forest. I have walked many trails tracking illegal aliens and drug smugglers in the Pajarita Wilderness, Miller Peak Wilderness, San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area and Chiricahua Wilderness. In Texas, where I raised and finished my Border Patrol career, I have conducted river patrols by canoe along 83 miles of the Wild and Scenic Rio Grande River. Thoughts of these areas still bring back great memories and interest. I am personally attached to these areas, but if we don't secure our borders, we stand the chance to not just lose these areas, but we stand a chance to continue to lose innocent American lives.

I know from experience and it is well documented that illegal alien crossings and smuggling bring trash, human waste, trails, illegal roads and wildfires to private lands as well as federal

lands. Many federal lands are remote and difficult to get to and provide the perfect haven for illicit activity. Utilizing technology and partnerships can be increased to mitigate and minimize impacts to federal lands.

What is needed to secure our border is the right combination of manpower, technology, and infrastructure. If you take my county for instance and almost 517 miles of border between Terrell to Hudspeth Counties, there isn't a need for a border wall. In much of this area, we have a God made barrier, but what we do need is manpower, technology and infrastructure projects such as roads. There isn't a one size fits all solution when it comes to the various regions along the U.S./Mexico border.

Collaboration on infrastructure and technology deployments on federal lands will strengthen the preservation of our natural resources. An example of infrastructure needed may be negotiating a new road with a landowner that would allot Border Patrol access to the Wild and Scenic Rio Grande River or it may be working with the U.S. Forest Service to create a preplaced firebreak or brush removal of invasive and non-native in a remote border region within the Coronado National Forrest. Coordinated efforts for technology deployments would also lessen the impact on federal lands. Increased access to federal lands increases border security and the mission of the U.S. Border Patrol as well as the mission of the Department of the Interior, allowing them to protect America, and increase the protection of federal lands along the border.

The U.S. Border Patrol's mission was once illegal immigration, but after September 11, 2001, that mission was no longer our mission. Our mission became protecting the homeland by keeping bad people and bad things from crossing America's borders.

In closing, the chaos we experienced along the Southwest Border over the last four years was preventable. The border was open, overrun, and the criminal organizations took full advantage of our political gridlock. Americans were impacted, those crossing our border illegally were impacted, communities were impacted, and lastly, federal lands were impacted.