

Statement of
Luis E. Barker
Chief Patrol Agent, El Paso Sector Border Patrol
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
Department of Homeland Security
Before the House Committee on Government Reform
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice Drug Policy and Human Resources
Field Hearing - Las Cruces New Mexico
June 29, 2004

Mr. Chairman, distinguished committee members, I am pleased for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the El Paso Border Patrol Sector's law enforcement initiatives to secure the U.S. border in New Mexico and West Texas, with regards to the extent and impact of narcotics trafficking, interdiction, and our interaction with other agencies, federal, state and local, to address this concern. My name is Luis E. Barker, and I am the Chief Patrol Agent for the El Paso Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol, a branch of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) within the Department of Homeland Security.

Let me begin by thanking you and your colleagues, on behalf of all of CBP, for your continued support, as we pursue our primary mission of preventing the entry of terrorists and their weapons of terror; and enforce the laws that protect America's homeland by the detection, interdiction, and apprehension of those who attempt to illegally enter or smuggle any person or contraband across our Nation's sovereign borders.

The challenges for securing our borders and protecting our homeland are many and ever-changing. CBP's goal is to increase our operational effectiveness to the point where the

likelihood of apprehension is high enough to be an effective deterrent. We continue to improve our capabilities by adding or shifting resources as required. Although this strategy of deterrence was developed with immigration issues in mind, it has equal effect on narcotics smuggling.

The El Paso Sector is responsible for securing the 289 miles of border between the ports of entry in Texas and New Mexico. To accomplish this, we have established four Border Patrol stations in the two westernmost counties of Texas, and eight stations in the State of New Mexico. This sector's vast area of operations is divided into three main corridors: the Deming Corridor, the El Paso Corridor, and the Fabens Corridor. Narcotic smuggling is active in all of these corridors.

The border area we secure is unique in that we must control both a land border across New Mexico, and a water border defined by the Rio Grande River. In many areas only a barbed-wire fence, if anything, marks the border. As a deterrent, we continue to place lighting, fencing, and vehicle barriers in many areas such as Sunland Park, New Mexico and Deming. This has proven to be effective in controlling illegal entries, especially of vehicles carrying contraband, to include narcotics.

Although physical barriers and lighting assist in border control, additional technology has proven to be a great deterrent and a "force multiplier" for our Agents. Remote Video Surveillance Systems, sensors, radiation pagers, night vision equipment, density meters,

and other tools are a great asset. In addition, better data on criminals, or wanted subjects assists us in locating subjects and in determining their true identity.

Large population centers on both sides of the border helps make the El Paso area ideal as a major hub for the smuggling of people, narcotics and other contraband. Highways, hotels and other infrastructure attract both legitimate trade and travel, and unfortunately those adept in illicit activities. To maintain control of the border, we use both forward deployment – that is patrolling the immediate border -- and secondary operations such as traffic checkpoints and task force initiatives with other agencies. We have agents that liaison with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Joint Terrorism Task Force; the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Office; the U.S. Marshall's Task Force; the U.S. Attorney's Office; and state and local law enforcement entities. Furthermore, we work daily with officials from the Government of Mexico through our Mexican Liaison Unit (MLU) to address our concerns of the border area. We have been very successful in identifying, apprehending and prosecuting law violators through these efforts.

We continue to employ every available means at our disposal to combat illegal activity which occurs in this area. Besides coverage on the border, we maintain six permanent traffic checkpoints, five of which are in New Mexico. Checkpoint operations are an essential component of our enforcement strategy, and from fiscal year 2002 to the present they have accounted for 18% of our narcotic seizures, and virtually all seizures involving cocaine and heroin. The purpose of these checkpoints is to detect and interdict terrorists,

undocumented immigrants, contraband and weapons of mass effect. As a result of these checkpoint operations, we frequently encounter violators of law and persons wanted for crimes such as narcotics smuggling, murder, and assault. Improvements in information access and the expansion of the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS), have assisted us greatly in this regard. With these resources, we have identified 2,613 criminal aliens in fiscal year 2004, some 300 of which were wanted for various crimes ranging from assault to weapons violations.

Interdiction efforts often cause smugglers to resort to extraordinary measures to avoid apprehension. They are more likely to flee from agents and use violence, by using their vehicles as a weapon, or use firearms to protect their cargo. On October 12, 2002, a female agent assigned to the Fort Hancock Station was shot in the leg while attempting to interdict a narcotics load. She survived and has returned to full duty. Despite the desperation of the smugglers, our agents continue to be vigilant in protecting our borders.

In conclusion, I would like to add that the men and women of the El Paso Sector are committed to the safety and security of our nation's borders, no matter the threat – whether from terrorists, undocumented immigrants or narcotics smugglers. I am extremely proud of the commitment and professionalism of these men and women and the important role they play in our national security. I can also assure you that this degree of dedication and vigilance will continue, despite operational challenges. I am confident also of your continued support and I thank the Subcommittee for this

opportunity to present my testimony to you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.