

Opening Statement  
Chairman Mark Souder

“The Impact of the Drug Trade on Border Security: Field  
Hearing in Las Cruces, New Mexico”

Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,  
and Human Resources  
Committee on Government Reform

June 29, 2004

Good morning and thank you all for coming. I would first like to thank Congressman Stevan Pearce for inviting us back to this region to continue studying the problem of drug smuggling along the Texas and New Mexico border. I have appreciated Congressman Pearce’s leadership and support on drug issues at the House of Representatives, and I look forward to working with him in the months ahead.

Since the summer of 2001, this Subcommittee has been making a comprehensive study of law enforcement at our nation’s borders, including a field hearing last April in El Paso.\* There have been some major developments since that hearing in how our federal government approaches the drug trafficking threat, most notably the reorganization of the former Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service within the new Department of Homeland Security.

The Southwest border remains the primary conduit of illegal drugs into our country, with up to three-quarters of narcotics coming across it. The Las Cruces-El Paso area in particular has been the site of some of the worst drug smuggling activity in the country for decades, and the problem is not going away. Drug seizures here have risen significantly during this decade, even as they fell in other parts of the country. It seems that almost

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\* In 2002, the Subcommittee released a report on its ongoing study, *Federal Law Enforcement at the Borders and Ports of Entry: Challenges and Solutions* (H. Rpt. No. 107-794), which can be found on the Government Printing Office’s website, at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107\\_cong\\_reports&docid=f:hr794.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107_cong_reports&docid=f:hr794.pdf).

every week, law enforcement agents discover huge shipments of drugs in this area, especially at the El Paso port of entry. Drug smuggling and related crime have taken a toll on the environment and the quality of life for local residents, besides presenting a threat to the entire nation.

Because of the very real threat posed by drug smuggling here and everywhere else in the nation, Congress made stopping that smuggling one of the primary missions of the new Department of Homeland Security. Taken together, the Border Patrol agents, the former INS and Customs inspectors, the Customs special agents, and the former Customs pilots represented America's front line against drug traffickers. Without them, we will have little or no defense against the smugglers. Thus, it is vitally important that these agencies remain focused on the narcotics threat.

Today's hearing is intended to focus on how the various federal agencies with counternarcotics responsibility – including the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) divisions of the Department of Homeland Security, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) – are meeting the problem of illegal drug smuggling. In particular, we need to closely examine how well these agencies are coordinating their efforts with each other, and with their state and local law enforcement partners. It is my hope that at this hearing we will learn what steps DHS, DEA and other agencies are taking to improve coordination and cooperation in counternarcotics efforts. I also hope to hear about what new initiatives our federal agencies have put in place to stay ahead of the traffickers. President Bush has made reducing drug trafficking and abuse in our country a top priority for his Administration, and DHS and its partners are vital to achieving that goal over the long term.

These issues are all very important and extremely urgent, and we look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about ways to address them. I again thank Congressman Pearce for joining us today, and for the assistance that he and his staff provided to our Subcommittee in setting up this hearing. We also welcome six representatives of the federal agencies primarily responsible for dealing with drug smuggling in this region. We welcome Mr. Luis Barker, Chief Patrol Agent of the U.S. Border Patrol's El Paso Sector; Mr. Kenneth Cates, Associate Special Agent in Charge of ICE's El Paso division; Mr. Errol Chavez, Regional Director of the New

Mexico Regional Partnership of the Southwest Border High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a program of the Office of National Drug Control Policy intended to foster cooperation between federal, state and local law enforcement; Mr. Luis Garcia, Director of Field Operations at CBP's El Paso Field Office; Mr. Sandalio Gonzalez, Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's El Paso Division Office; and Mr. Steve Swingle, Acting Aviation Group Supervisor of the Albuquerque Air Branch of the ICE Office of Air and Marine Operations.

When examining border policies, we must of course also seek the input of representatives of the state and local agencies who also have to deal with the border drug threat. We welcome the Honorable Louise Peterson, Hidalgo County Commissioner; Captain Richard Williams, Commander of District 4 of the New Mexico State Police; Sheriff Robert E. Hall of Hidalgo County; and Sheriff Juan Hernandez of Doña Ana County. We thank everyone for taking the time this morning to join us for this important hearing.