



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Statement

of

Steve Swingle
Acting Aviation Group Supervisor
Albuquerque Air Branch
Office of Air and Marine Operations

Immigration and Customs Enforcement
Department of Homeland Security

Before

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

“Impact of the Drug Trade and Border Security”

June 29, 2004 at 1:00 p.m.
Las Cruces, New Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman, it is a pleasure to appear before you today and share an operational view of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Office of Air and Marine Operations (AMO) on “The Impact of the Drug Trade on Border Security.” Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for your interest in this critical national security matter and for your continued support of the men and women of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) who put their lives on the line daily to secure our borders against smuggling organizations and potential terrorists.

ICE’s Office of Air and Marine Operations protects our Nation’s people and critical infrastructure by using an integrated and coordinated air and marine force to deter, interdict, and prevent potential acts of terrorism arising from the unlawful movement of people and goods across the borders of the United States.

AMO’s three core competencies -- air and marine interdiction, air and marine law enforcement, and airspace security -- provide critical, rapid, and flexible support to the Department of Homeland Security’s counter-terrorism, law enforcement, and counter-smuggling operations at sea, on our borders, over our cities, and across this Nation’s interior.

As an air and marine law enforcement agency, AMO employs 133 aircraft and 72 marine assets to meet many of the Nation’s critical homeland security needs.

The majority of AMO's 1,000 personnel are operationally deployed – primarily along the Southern border. Major AMO facilities are located in Texas, Florida, New Mexico, Arizona, Louisiana, California, and Puerto Rico. In addition, the first two of five planned Northern Border Branches are being launched in Bellingham, Washington, and Plattsburgh, New York, this year. Currently, AMO branches across the country provide personnel and assets on temporary duty to enforce airspace security over Washington, D.C. and for other sensitive locations and events throughout the nation as designated.

Also, in support of Presidential Decision Directive-14, AMO routinely deploys internationally to conduct counter-drug missions in source and transit zones.

A key component of AMO's integration capabilities, the Air and Marine Operations Center (AMOC) at March Air Reserve Base in Riverside, California, integrates military and civilian radar tracking data to provide actionable real-time intelligence to AMO aircraft and vessels throughout the Western Hemisphere. Other customers include the National Capital Region Coordination Center (NCRCC), NORAD, the U.S. Secret Service Operations Center, and the Transportation Security Operations Center. To ensure the highest and safest operational standards, AMO also has a Training and Standardization Branch in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

DRUG TRADE IMPACT ON BORDER SECURITY

The focus of today's hearing is drug trafficking at the Southern border. I would like to highlight how AMO contributes to the fight against narcotic trafficking. In fact, AMO's legacy mission was born in the fight against illegal movement of drugs and people by air and sea -- mainly across our Southwest border.

While AMO has been tasked with new missions in the post-September 11, 2001, strategic environment, the agency remains dedicated to our legacy missions because those threats remain as urgent as ever.

In particular, existing smuggling routes and networks represent a new threat. As the U.S. continues to harden legal points of entry against potential terrorists, there are very serious risks that traditional smuggling routes and networks are vulnerable to exploitation by terrorists who seek to covertly move operatives and weapons into this country.

Smuggling networks are in the business of moving people and goods. These are multi-million-dollar criminal enterprises dedicated to the illegal movement of tens of thousands of illegal immigrants and tons of illicit cargo into our country without detection.

It takes little imagination to understand how easily such mature delivery systems could facilitate the movement of terrorists and their weapons into this country.

OVERSEAS MISSIONS

For AMO, border security is much more than the linear boundary on the map. Instead, AMO focuses on the smuggling networks, conveyances, and individuals who illegally move goods and people across the border. Often, that requires investigations and intelligence collection far beyond our borders.

The U.S. benefits by receiving the results of intelligence and investigative leads that are needed to refine the operation against an ever-evolving and dynamic drug-smuggling threat. AMO also deploys surveillance and interception aircraft to South and Central America to fly interdiction missions in the source and transit zones and air bridge denial missions over Colombian airspace.

With a unique investigative and intelligence capability, AMO seeks to adjust in real-time its operational strategy against the threat before those threats reach the United States borders.

TETHERED AEROSTAT RADAR SYSTEM

The TARS is the only fixed-site system able to provide radar coverage of low-level targets (100-500 feet above ground level) with information on speed,

heading, altitude and Identification Friend or (not sure) Foe (IFF) IFF capability. The system is capable of being modified to provide surveillance of maritime targets in the coastal regions. It is a vital system for the acquisition of intelligence on air trafficking trends within Mexico and throughout the Caribbean. TARS provides unique surveillance, detection and targeting information for action by AMO marine assets along the maritime Southern tier.

While the Department of Defense (DoD) runs the TARS program, the Department of Homeland Security is a strong supporter and, through the AMOC, the largest customer for the operational products the system produces.

MODERNIZATION/RECAPITALIZATION

The Department is currently studying the aviation missions, programs and assets of Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Custom Enforcement, and the Coast Guard. The purpose of this analysis is to identify overlaps in aviation capability, assets, training, maintenance, logistics, facilities and acquisition that can be leveraged in the near term to recognize efficiencies in response time and operating expense. The Department has chartered an Aviation Management Council to provide leadership and oversight on joint DHS Aviation policy, operations, procedures, requirements, sourcing strategies and asset management to support the needs of the Department. This group is currently engaged in drafting a Department-wide Aviation Concept of Operations for review by the DHS Joint Requirements Council.

These review processes will help examine AMO in view of the post-9/11 and post-DHS creation strategic environment, which includes new requirements such as airspace security over cities such as Washington, D.C., and during designated National Security Special Events, as well as Continuity of Government operations and the launch of five new Northern Border Aviation branches. AMO covers the most pressing tasks and missions today by surging its personnel, resources and force structures that are still mainly sized against the pre-9/11 legacy missions. Supplemental appropriations have met some of the additional costs associated with the expansion in AMO missions and responsibilities. This is a significant and rapid expansion of operations and responsibilities so AMO is presently revalidating requirements and identifying the force structure and capital equipment needed to complete its transition into a force enabled to cover fully all of the new air and marine missions beyond its legacy Customs interdiction role.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to thank you Mr. Chairman again for the opportunity to highlight the Office of Air and Marine Operations within Immigration and Customs Enforcement. AMO remains a critical tool in the national effort to secure our borders against smuggling networks and potential terrorists. It would be my pleasure to answer any questions you may have.