



Stop Border Deaths Now!

A project of the Border Working Group

Attn: Immigration Policy Aide

September 8, 2005

The United States-Mexico border is a physically imposing and beautiful area. It is a distinctive habitat, and one of the most fragile wilderness areas in the country. Soaring summer temperatures and freezing winters make it a deadly place to travel, distinctly inhospitable to humans who do not have the resources to handle the climatic extremes. In the past 10 years, thousands of people, forced by tightened U.S. immigration policies into these dangerous regions, have died due to exposure and dehydration. Undocumented migrants, however, are not the only group negatively affected by U.S. border policy: the increased militarization of the southern border threatens jaguars, owls, pronghorn sheep, and many other local species, and greatly intensifies stress on soil and water systems that cannot adjust to human use.

Ecological damage to the area is likely to increase. The U.S. Border Patrol has numerous proposals on the table to increase infrastructure and patrols in the area to deter migration. Many of these projects aim to fortify isolated stretches of desert that include some of the most pristine wild areas in the nation. Recent passage of the REAL ID act could exempt the Border Patrol from conducting appropriate Environmental Impact Studies of the area. In addition to pushing migrant flows into even more inhospitable terrain, these construction projects could cause devastating damage to the fragile ecosystem in the borderlands.

In November 2004, the Border Patrol issued a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for operations in southern Arizona. It details the infrastructure to be built along the state's 380-mile border: a 253 percent increase in remote surveillance video cameras; a 223 percent increase in the number of miles of fencing along the border; a 340 percent increase in the number of miles of the border lit with 24-hour lighting (nocturnal animals will be particularly affected by this incursion); and a huge increase in the number of new roads built in sensitive desert areas.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity (www.sw-center.org), the Border Patrol's "on and off-road patrols, road construction, aircraft overflights, military training, ... stadium-style lights, construction of walls and fences, and intrusive remote sensing and surveillance operations ... damage legally protected natural resources, disturb rare and endangered wildlife, and threaten the survival of the already imperiled plants and habitats on which they depend."

Several animals native to the Sonoran Desert are already critically endangered, and will be significantly impacted by the proposed Border Patrol projects. For example, due to habitat loss and over-hunting, the jaguar is threatened throughout the U.S.-Mexico border. The American jaguar has been virtually eliminated from its entire U.S. range, and is just beginning to stage a comeback. A conservation strategy is planned for the species, and will rely on protecting and maintaining migratory patterns from Mexico into the U.S. According to the Border Action Network (BAN), proposed migrant control projects, such as expanded fencing, "will be built directly across the portion of the border that these animals are almost certainly using as a migration corridor. This will effectively prevent any future migration into the U.S. and will jeopardize the survival of the entire species."

In May 2005, Congress passed H.R. 418, the REAL ID Act, which allows for the expedited construction of roads, walls, fences and other barriers along U.S. borders by providing DHS with authority to waive any federal or state law, including those that protect public health, safety and the environment. This bill would apply to all areas along and "in the vicinity" of boundaries with both Mexico and Canada. Federally protected lands, including national parks, wildlife refuges, forests and wilderness areas, could be subject to this provision.

Infrastructure proposals that harm the environment in the fragile southwest should be measured carefully. Current data shows that despite the massive buildup of infrastructure in California, Arizona, and Texas over the past 12 years, the Border Patrol has not succeeded in effectively deterring migration. Rather, it has revised its estimates of undocumented entries into the U.S. upwards since 1993 – from an average of 250,000 entries then to almost 500,000 today. Before engaging in the construction of massive infrastructure projects in environmentally sensitive areas like the Sonoran desert in Arizona, the Border Patrol should evaluate the effectiveness of such infrastructure. To continue on its current path is to waste resources on failed security models and destroy a unique wilderness area that Americans have treasured and enjoyed for over a century.

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In the last two weeks of August, 27 people died trying to enter the United States. The majority of these deaths occurred in Texas, with Arizona placing second for migrant deaths. Already, 2005 has become the deadliest year on record, with 385 recorded deaths to date – surpassing the previous record of 383 set in 2000. Below are a few of the victims' stories.

August 17: A group of migrants are apprehended by Border Patrol and tell agents about a body they passed on their journey. An unidentified body is found dead under a tree in the Welton Stations Area of Operations in Yuma, Arizona.

August 19: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Biologists find a unidentified body dead from heat related illness near Yuma, Arizona.

August 20: A rancher near Tucson, Arizona, finds a dead body. The cause of death appeared to be dehydration, but the age and sex of the victim could not be determined.

August 21: The body of an adult male is found dead east of Why, Arizona.

August 21: The body of a man is found dead in the San Diego Sector of California. The cause of death is still pending.

August 22: The body of a male is found dead in the San Diego Sector of California. The cause of death is still pending.

August 24: The skeletal remains of an identified body are found in the Del Rio Sector of Texas.

August 25: An adult male is found dead from heat exposure 25 miles northwest of Laredo, Texas.

August 25: The body of an adult male is discovered south of Little Tucson, Arizona.

August 25: The body of a man is discovered 7 miles outside of Laredo, Texas. The probable cause of death is heat exposure.

August 25: A man, who died from heat exposure, is found 40 miles outside of Laredo, Texas.

August 25: A man is discovered dead 28 miles outside of Laredo, Texas by Border Patrol.

August 26: A dead man is found around 10 a.m. near Yuma, Arizona. The man was carrying Mexican identification.

August 26: Police discover the body of a deceased man near Yuma, Arizona. The man was carrying Mexican identification.

August 26: Border Patrol find the body of a dead man in the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range in Arizona.

August 27: A woman is found dead in Deming, New Mexico off of Highway 9.

August 28: A man's body is discovered on the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation in Arizona.

August 29: A migrant apprehended by Border Patrol, tell agents about the group of 4 he left in the desert. Border Patrol back tracked the journey and found 3 still alive and 1 woman who had died in the Cargo Muchacho Mountains in California.

August 29: An unknown body is discovered outside of Hebbbronville, Texas. The cause of death is severe heat exposure and dehydration.

August 29: The body of a man is found by Border Patrol 17 miles west of Hebbbronville, which is 40 miles east of Laredo, Texas.

August 30: Another unknown victim is discovered in Bruni, located 40 miles east of Laredo, Texas.

August 30: The skeletal remains of a man who fell from a train near Fort Hancock weeks ago are found.

August 30: A Yuma woman discovers the body of an unidentified woman in an abandoned horse trailer located at Avenue 3 ½ E and County 21st Street in Yuma, Arizona. The woman appeared to be dead for several weeks.