

Subcommittee on Oversight, Management and Accountability  
of the Committee on Homeland Security

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Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about border infrastructure and its effect on trade and security. I am the President of the Border Industrial Association, which represents the Santa Teresa industrial base within which we are meeting today. Our association has more than 100 members, most of whom are involved in manufacturing, warehousing, and distribution. We represent more than \$2 billion in investment, 5,000 jobs, and an export base to Mexico of nearly \$2 billion.

I have been involved with the Santa Teresa Industrial base for almost 29 years, before the Santa Teresa Port of Entry was opened in 1993. I have seen this base grow from four buildings to four industrial parks that house more than 60 companies. Our little, antiquated port of entry has grown from a remote, obscure facility to the fifth most important export port of entry on the entire U.S.-Mexico border. Last year, we surpassed Brownsville and Nogales for this place on the list.

The Santa Teresa Port of Entry is the mouse that roared. All of this development around us and immediately to the north would not be here if the federal government had chosen not to invest in the port. Yet since establishment, very few major improvements have been made to the port, while at the same time our trade and crossings have continued to grow. During the past 10 years, New Mexico has at times led the nation in export growth percentage. In 2014, New Mexico's exports growth percentage to Mexico increased by 39 percent, the highest of any state in the nation. In that same year, the Las Cruces Metropolitan Statistical Area, with the City of Las Cruces 50 miles north of here, led all MSAs nationwide in the export growth percentage increase. This increase in trade was not due to the City of Las Cruces, which has 100,000 people and is the largest city in Doña Ana County, but because of the industrial base that we have built here in Santa Teresa to supply production inputs to Mexico's manufacturing sector. This symbiotic relationship has allowed us to attract investment to our region and to create good-paying jobs.

Down here, we don't view Mexico as a nemesis or a problem. It is a neighbor, partner, and one of the strongest economic opportunities that our country has. We don't look at the border as a barrier that separates us, but rather a place that brings our two countries together – and ports of entry are the portals that make this happen. Our trade relationship with Mexico helps our companies, and ultimately our country, to remain competitive in the global market.

Investing in ports of entry facilitates trade, which increases revenues via investment and employment, thus ultimately adding to the coffers of the U.S. in general. This is a much wiser investment than a border-long wall. A wall is needed where a wall is needed, particularly urban areas and places where illegal crossers can quickly blend into the general population. However, the immigrant crisis that we are experiencing doesn't have to do with illegal crossers scaling walls or trying to cross in the desert where there are no barriers, rather the crisis is occurring at our ports of entry where migrants come to surrender themselves in hope of being granted amnesty.

When large waves of immigrants approach a port of entry, the port director has the discretion to shut the facility down for security reasons, and to protect his/her personnel. There have been incidents of immigrants aggressively storming ports of entry and several Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officers have been injured. Although ports of entry don't typically stay closed down for very long, any closures will result in traffic piling up on both sides of the border. This is highly disruptive to the flow of people and cargo, causing inefficiencies and a drop in productivity for companies on a tight supply chain.

In this sense, Congress must focus on modifying amnesty laws to prevent future migrant crises such as the one we are currently experiencing. Currently, all migrants have to do is reach U.S. soil and ask for amnesty. Even though the waves of migrants have decreased, any subsequent wave approaching ports of entry can cause major problems. Asylum seekers have to be taken into custody, documented, physically examined by medics, fed, and housed at the ports until a more appropriate space is found to keep them until their hearing. This takes CBP officers out of their posts to perform these functions, resulting in commercial lanes being shut down, thus causing long lines, delays, and a discouragement of investment.

I have always touted the case for modernizing the infrastructure at the ports. However, even more important is the human element, namely CBP officers that protect the U.S. from drugs and contraband, and who are also an integral element in the U.S.'s trade with countries such as Mexico. There is a gap between the number of CBP officers needed and how many are actually being recruited. Many ports of entry are understaffed, and crossing lanes that could be used to process people and commerce are closed because there are simply not enough CBP officers to attend to them. We estimate in Santa Teresa alone, our port is understaffed by approximately 30 CBP officers.

And it is not as simple as saying that all the U.S. government has to do is hire more people. When a CBP prospect is recruited, he/she will have to go through an extensive training period. After this is over, an agent will still need to shadow an experienced CBP officer for at least one year, after which the new CBP officer will finally be available to be fully functional in his/her position. Depending on the traffic, strategic importance, and need, new CBP officers are then assigned to a particular port of entry. In other words, it takes quite a bit of time to recruit, train, and position CBP agents. It is not simply a case of hiring them and putting them directly on the

line. Furthermore, many young people entering the workforce, who could be recruits, are not interested in a job that involves stress, sometimes dark human elements, and often long hours.

This particular holiday season, which we at the border call the “Paisano Season,” will test the limits of the infrastructure at our ports of entry and the CBP officers who are trained to keep the U.S. safe from illegal elements, as millions of people travel back and forth across the border to be with their families. The executive branch of government and Congress must work together to appropriate the necessary funding to recruit and hire more CBP officers. This human element must not be overlooked. Our ability to keep our trade with the world growing rests on the backs of these individuals. It would be foolish to skimp in this area and create bottlenecks that are within our power to prevent.

Creating modern, secure ports of entry also provides security in times of crises. However, investing in port infrastructure has to be congruent on both sides of the border. Neither side can simply choose to invest in port infrastructure without coordinating with the other side.

Approximately 50 miles east of here lies the Port of Tornillo, where the federal government rushed to invest \$133 million in a modern port of entry only to discover that Mexico was unwilling to also invest in road and infrastructure improvements on its side of the border. How we could have used that investment here where the Santa Teresa Port of Entry is busting at the seams – investing in existing ports of entry that allow trade between the U.S. and Mexico are a solid and lucrative investment for our country.

For every dollar the federal government invests in port infrastructure and CBP agents, a multiplier effect in which a huge “bang for the buck” is created, benefitting not only border communities, but the entire U.S. economy. Mexico is our third most important trading partner, and working with our southern neighbor to modernize ports of entry with new infrastructure, including the latest equipment and technology, creates economic development opportunities south of the border, which allows Mexican citizens the ability to provide for their families, thus curbing illegal immigration.

In conclusion, I urge this committee to consider the opportunities that investing in port infrastructure and personnel will bring to our nation and southern partner, and the negative ramifications on trade security by not doing so. Madam Chairwoman, I thank you and the members of the committee for the opportunity to provide you with my thoughts.