



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Oversight, Management, and Accountability Subcommittee Chairwoman Xochitl Torres Small (D-NM)

Promoting Safe and Efficient Travel and Trade at America's Land Ports of Entry

December 2, 2019

New Mexico Border Authority, Santa Teresa, New Mexico

I'm grateful for the opportunity to hold this important hearing on land ports of entry (POEs) at home in my own district. I also want to extend my thanks to the witnesses who have joined us today to discuss the challenges we face with infrastructure, technology, and staffing at POEs. Of the 110 land ports of entry on the U.S. border, three—Santa Teresa, Columbus, and Antelope Wells—are in the district I represent.

Earlier this morning, Ranking Member Crenshaw and I had the opportunity to visit one of those ports—the Santa Teresa Port of Entry—just down the road from here. The visit was valuable to understanding the critical role ports of entry, and the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Officers who staff those ports, play in facilitating commerce and preventing contraband, such as illegal drugs, from entering the country. Unfortunately, many land POEs have outdated infrastructure, not enough technology to detect contraband, and suffer from staffing shortages. For example, related to infrastructure, several POE facilities are over 70 years old and even those that are 15 to 20 years old are outdated and not keeping pace with CBP's current operational needs. In a July 2019 Government Accountability Office report, CBP Officers identified poor conditions in existing facilities, insufficient inspection space, and design flaws that impede traffic flow. According to the same report, CBP's goal is to assess conditions at each CBP-owned land POE every 3 years, but it has not met this goal in recent years due to limited resources.

Since well-functioning infrastructure is critical to effectively screen people and cargo, and facilitate travel and trade, I'd like to explore how we can ensure these assessments are completed. Congress must fully understand the investment required to modernize our POEs. In addition to well-functioning infrastructure, ports require technology to effectively screen cargo and facilitate trade. A key technology for detecting contraband without slowing commerce is non-intrusive inspection (NII) systems. These systems allow officers to "see" inside a vehicle without physically opening or unloading it. In 2019, recognizing the value of NII systems, Congress provided CBP \$570 million to install additional systems on the southwest border. I introduced a bill last week, cosponsored by Ranking Member Crenshaw, requiring CBP to provide an implementation plan to Congress on how it is deploying and utilizing NII systems and is going to achieve 100 percent scanning of all vehicles using these systems. By increasing NII scanning rates to 100 percent at all land ports of entry, we can guard against transnational criminal organizations shifting their smuggling operations to other ports of entry along the border, particularly rural and remote ports. Although technology can be a great asset, it is no substitute for hard-working men and women who wear the CBP uniform.

According to CBP's Workload Staffing Model, CBP lacks more than 3,500 Officers. I understand from the union representing CBP Officers that the Santa Teresa POE is understaffed and CBP Officers are having to work double shifts. This situation is not unique to New Mexico. This Subcommittee explored CBP's recruitment and retention challenges at a hearing in March of this year. I know the agency has been trying to address the challenges through innovative means, but it is not a problem that will be quickly solved. One way that CBP is addressing staffing shortages is through public-private partnerships. Through these, entities such as private companies, can pay salary and overtime expenses for Officers to extend a port's hours. But we cannot use private investment as an excuse to delay critical job growing investment. I'd like to hear more about how CBP is leveraging these partnerships and to what extent they are sustainable in the long run given the overtime required of Officers. I look forward to discussing how we can enhance America's land ports of entry, including those here in New Mexico.

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