



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson**

***Boots on the Ground or Eyes in the Sky: How Best to Utilize the National Guard to Achieve Operational Control***

April 17, 2012 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border and Maritime Security subcommittee hearing entitled “Boots on the Ground or Eyes in the Sky: How Best to Utilize the National Guard to Achieve Operational Control”:

“The Committee on Homeland Security has a long history of conducting oversight of the use of the National Guard for border security.

As far back as 2006, when DHS and the National Guard announced Operation Jumpstart, this Committee has examined issues related to deployment of military personnel along the southwest border.

Historically, National Guard support has primarily consisted of providing “boots on the ground” to supplement Border Patrol personnel at the border.

Deploying troops to the border was intended as a stopgap measure until more Border Patrol agents could be hired, trained, and deployed to the field.

Now that Border Patrol has achieved that goal, with over 21,328 agents on board, it makes sense to rely on civilians to fulfill what is a law enforcement mission.

Today, under Operation Phalanx, the National Guard is providing a more focused kind of support to the Border Patrol by deploying important air assets and limited support personnel to bolster Customs and Border Protection’s operations along the southern border. This assistance is much needed.

A soon to be released Government Accountability Office report concluded that CBP’s Office of Air and Marine has been unable to meet its own benchmarks for fulfilling the Border Patrol’s requests for air support along the southwest border.

GAO’s conclusion is not surprising given significant cuts to CBP Air and Marine’s budget in recent years.

Hopefully, National Guard assets and personnel will help the Office of Air and Marine meet those benchmarks.

While this “force multiplier” is valuable to CBP’s mission, concerns remain. Operation Phalanx is currently expected to come to a close at the end of this year, and with that will go the National Guard’s air assets.

As a Member representing a state along the Gulf Coast, I am keenly aware that the border security mission is just one of many for the National Guard.

With its emergency response responsibilities, as well as its role overseas, it is unlikely the Guard will be able to sustain its border security mission indefinitely.

Therefore, we must figure out how to enhance CBP’s own capability to provide necessary air surveillance and support along the southwest border, even in these difficult budgetary times.

This will likely mean providing additional resources to CBP’s Office of Air and Marine, rather than

continuing to cut their funding.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how Operation Phalanx is progressing, what we can expect through the end of this year, and how CBP is preparing to take over these missions next year if and when the National Guard draws down its presence along the border.

I thank the witnesses for joining us today and the Chair and Ranking Member for working together in a bipartisan manner on this hearing.”

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