

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Henry Cuellar (D-TX)

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

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

April 17, 2012

I am pleased that the Subcommittee is meeting today to examine the issue of using the National Guard to help secure America's southern border. In recent years the Department of Homeland Security, with support from Congress, has taken critical steps to deter and interdict undocumented individuals and narcotics from entering our country.

More remains to be done, however.

To that point, I support the partnership between the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Defense aimed at providing aerial surveillance support for U.S. Customs and Border Protection along the southern border.

Since 2006, I have supported the National Guard's presence along the U.S.-Mexico border because I believe it has been a critical component for CBP's mission to protect and secure our borders.

Now, with record-high Border Patrol agent staffing levels and low unauthorized immigrant apprehension rates, I believe we need to start looking at more cost-effective and efficient ways to spend our homeland security dollars.

I am particularly pleased that one of the focus areas of the new partnership is Laredo and the Rio Grand Valley Sectors; specifically, the placement of aviation assets in Laredo since February.

I want it to be noted that National Guard's presence on the border does not constitute militarizing the border, nor would I support such a measure because I do not believe it is in the best interest of the United States.

However, I do believe our local, state, and federal law enforcement agents will benefit greatly by the decision to shift the National Guard's mission to a multi-layered aerial surveillance approach.

Also, an increase in DHS's use of multi-purpose aerial assets equipped with the latest surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities will ensure that the proper assets are available and accessible to help carryout our border strategy.

The National Guard's new aerial support will provide "eyes in the sky" that will increase Border Patrol's response capabilities, allowing them to quickly move from one location to another to address emerging threats of illegal activity.

This hearing will also allow us to address concerns about the impact of budget cuts to basic mission support activities within CBP's Office of Air and Marine. As we all know the Office of Air Marine ensures that CBP has air surveillance and interdiction capabilities.

Unfortunately, the FY 2013 budget request a 52% reduction in the Office of Air and Marine's air and marine procurement accounts. This type of reduction is particularly troubling as it comes at a time when DHS is looking to maximize its available resources.

I believe that the more we can tap into cutting-edge technologies to support our agents, the better prepared they will be to protect our border communities.