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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

***The Impact of Sequestration on Homeland Security:
Scare Tactics or Possible Threat?***

April 12, 2013 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency hearing entitled “The Impact of Sequestration on Homeland Security: Scare Tactics or Possible Threat?”:

“Today, we will hear from the Department of Homeland Security and three of its component agencies on how the Department has been affected by the sequestration of its budget and its plans for going forward.

We will also hear from the National Border Patrol Council on how our front-line border personnel have been affected.

I would like to state at the outset, that on August 1, 2011, I, along with 161 of my colleagues voted NO on the Budget Control Act, which contained sequestration provisions that went into effect on March 1, 2013.

I maintain my disagreement with this harsh measure.

I agree that steps should be taken to reduce the federal deficit.

However, a more common-sense approach that would allow agencies the flexibility to reduce spending in a more thoughtful manner would be a far better alternative than sequestration.

Pursuant to the sequester, federal agencies were hit with a 5% across-the-board cut on every program, project or activity under its responsibility and control.

Five percent may not seem large but when converted to dollars it is clear that the sequester will require the federal government to operate in a diminished capacity.

For example, Departmental Management and Operations is expected to be cut by \$24 million.

Operating expenses for the United States Secret Service, which is responsible for protecting the President of the United States, the White House and visiting dignitaries, is expected to receive a cut of \$84 million.

Federal Air Marshals, the last line of defense against those who seek to disrupt domestic flights through criminal or terrorist actions, will be slashed by \$49 million and are expected to remain on a hiring freeze.

Aviation security as a whole will receive over \$270 million in reductions.

Furthermore, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection is expected to receive cuts totaling approximately \$512 million and its employees appear to be the hardest hit by these reductions based on the threatened loss of overtime compensation.

These are not scare tactics.

These are real numbers affecting real people that jeopardize the safety and security of the United States of America.

It is unfortunate that Congress was not able to reach a compromise on the debt ceiling.

It is likewise unfortunate that years of haphazard government spending sparked by two wars and an uptick in homeland security and defense-related contracts added to the debt the U.S. carries.

However, it is fundamentally unfair to send hard-working federal workers home on furlough; expect these same hard-working employees to work overtime without being adequately compensated for doing so; and implementing hiring freezes resulting in overworked overstressed federal employees to become even more overworked and overstressed with no relief in sight.

Yet, that is exactly the situation the sequester has created.

And these cuts come on top of federal pay freezes that have been in place for almost two years.

In addition to its impact on federal employees, I am deeply concerned with the affect the sequester will have on security and its potential to place our nation at greater risk for a terrorist attack.

This concern goes beyond longer lines at airports and ports of entries to increased time frames for security clearances, reductions in cybersecurity personnel and less training for those operating at the heart of our security apparatus.

There are others who share my concern.

The Director of National Intelligence stated that the sequester is reminiscent of budget cuts that hampered intelligence operations in the 1990s and its impact will only be noticed when we have a failure.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that: "In my personal military judgment, formed over 38 years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime right now, and I think sequestration would be completely oblivious to that, and counterproductive."

These men are not crying wolf.

I stand in agreement with the notion that the Secretary overstated the immediate impact of the sequestration.

Whether these statements were based on information she had at the time the statements was made or a product of bad planning and projections by the Department's leadership, the fact is the statements did not accurately represent what occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Order being signed as predicted.

We have a choice.

We can spend our time rehashing what happened and what did not happen compared to what was predicted or we can focus on the best way to manage the cuts that have now become the law in an effort to minimize the risk to our security.

I hope that we choose the latter."

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