

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Filemon Vela

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security Hearing

Bang for the Border Security Buck: What do we get for \$33 billion?

March 15, 2018

Today, we examine the Department's Border Security Improvement Plan and discuss other policy changes proposed by DHS to deter illegal migration.

The intention for this plan was to provide Congress with a substantive analysis of alternatives and life cycle costs for needed border security investments over the next decade.

Unfortunately, that is not what we received in January.

The way I see it, this Border Security Improvement Plan illustrates how the Trump Administration has politicized the way we identify border security gaps.

Of the \$33 billion in investments identified in this plan, approximately 55 percent of these taxpayer dollars are meant to build a "big, beautiful" border wall.

That seems unusually disproportionate given what we have heard in testimony from the Coast Guard and CBP's own frontline personnel over the course of this Congress.

For example, there is no mention of funding to fix CBP's Office of Field Operations' staffing shortage – a long-standing and well-known problem that requires CBP to hire more than 3,500 additional Officers.

Under this plan, it would seem that CBP Officers across the country, including those from my district and the Chairwoman's, will continue to work 16-hour shifts, be temporarily reassigned to different field offices, or do both in order to make up for the lack of officers.

These CBP staffing issues are critical to border security, yet the Trump Administration continues to ignore these problems.

The President was in San Diego this past Tuesday to view the border wall prototypes, but he chose not to visit San Ysidro or Otay Mesa Ports of Entry to get a sense of the volume of cargo and people our Officers have to vet and screen daily.

Rather, the Administration is seeking to nearly double the number of miles of barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border between ports of entry.

Under this plan, my district in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas would see a significant amount of construction, including in environmentally-sensitive locations like the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

My staff has made repeated requests for the data showing the number of apprehensions and risk-level in this location, and we are still waiting to be briefed by CBP on what has made the wildlife refuge its first priority for building a levee wall.

Despite the lessons from ten years ago, this plan does not provide estimates of the full cost, time, and resources that will be required to take land from private landowners to build President Trump's border wall.

The \$18 billion estimated by the Department will most likely skyrocket over time, just as costs did during previous border fence construction due to eminent domain.

Even more surprising is the lack of metrics.

In a series of reports released last year, GAO found that while CBP collects a lot of data, they have no metrics in place to accurately assess the return on our previous investments in technology and border barriers.

CBP may not have these metrics in place until September 2019.

And yet, here we are – actively discussing this \$33 billion plan without a sense of which tools have been most useful in securing our borders.

However, a report issued by DHS in September 2017 found that our southern land border is more difficult to cross today than ever before.

This report also found that we are seeing the lowest number of illegal entries in the past 40 years.

Given these findings, DHS' Border Security Improvement Plan seems like a retroactive justification for pursuing a Trump campaign promise instead of a plan based on a strategy to address known needs at our ports of entry or along our Northern border or our coastlines.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge Mr. Tony Reardon and Mr. Brandon Judd for joining us a second time in a row to testify.

Based on our hearing this past January, I introduced the Border and Port Security Act to start addressing the dire staffing shortages within CBP's Office of Field Operations.

Significant changes to CBP's hiring process and retention policies are needed, but in the meantime, we can at least begin by authorizing CBP to meet the requirements identified in its workload staffing models.

Again, I thank all of our witnesses for joining us this afternoon, and I am eager to hear your views on the Trump Administration's proposed approach to border security improvements.