

Barbara Hollingsworth

Turf battle endangers national security and the environment

Capitol Hill insiders are familiar with the paralysis that often results from turf battles between competing government agencies. But even veteran members of Congress are flabbergasted at a nearly decade-old feud between Homeland Security and Interior Department officials over protected wilderness areas on the nation's southern border that is undermining the core mission of both departments.

While bureaucrats hold "conversations" to defuse the standoff, illegal border crossers continue to damage sensitive environmental areas as they make their way unimpeded past the nation's security perimeter.

Ironically, Interior officials' refusal to allow Border Patrol officers free access to wilderness areas has made their own job more difficult. A 1964 environmental law used to block construction of towers needed for the "virtual fence" — even on land without a wilderness designation — has left thousands of acres wide open to border jumpers, including drug smugglers, human traffickers and potential terrorists, who are environmentally degrading the area.

Numerous trails that can be seen on Google maps have been worn into the barren Sonoran Desert, classified as an international Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations. While bureaucrats quibble, illegal visitors haul in mountains of trash, abandon vehicles, destroy vegetation, pollute the few sources of potable water, vandalize historic structures and set fires — one a week so far this year.

In a patronizing Aug. 1, 2008, e-mail, one Bureau of Land Management employee warned DHS that work on Secure Border Initiative security towers outside protected areas must be halted if there are any signs of an endangered Sonoran pronghorn within two miles.

"The pronghorn cannot be 'encouraged' to vacate the area. If no pronghorn are using the

Last year, a congressional conference committee gutted amendments sponsored by Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, and Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., that would have allowed Border Patrol agents to bypass environmental rules if necessary to secure the border.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Above: The wilderness area along the U.S./Mexican border contains a barbed wire fence with a makeshift gate leading into the U.S. from Mexico. **Below right:** Rep. Rob Bishop points to an area located in Coronado National Forest, just to the east of the Pajarita Wilderness. **Below left:** A gate leading into the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge contains a lock placed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to prevent the Border Patrol from being able to access the lands.



area at the time, then drilling can proceed." Pronghorns get more federal protection than American citizens, who are also endangered by the tens of thousands of foreign nationals who sneak across the border.

"They have very differing visions of what the priorities should be," Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, told *The Examiner*. These differences are readily apparent in an outrageous e-mail sent by the superintendent of the million-acre Organ Pipe

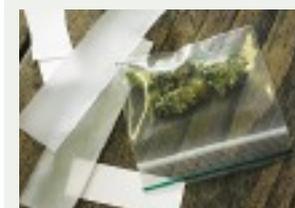
Cactus National Monument, claiming that Border Patrol agents do not have a "right of entry" to the same border areas they are trying to patrol.

In October, in response to congressional inquiries, the Congressional Research Service reported that there are 4.3 million acres of federal wilderness areas within 100 miles of the Mexican border. Much of this enormous area is currently controlled by human traffickers, drug runners and potential terrorists, not the U.S. government, Bishop maintains.

"This would be an ideal area to smuggle a weapon of mass destruc-

tion," according to a 2002 classified Interior Department report that was buried by the bureaucracy for almost eight years and finally surfaced in a load of documents that Bishop, ranking Republican on the House subcommittee that oversees federal lands, requested last year. Neither department has turned over all the requested records, including a full list of the \$10 million in "mitigation funds" DHS is forced to pay — a sort of toll on Border Patrol agents.

Bishop says the security situation has gotten worse since then because stepped-up enforce-



Drug gateway for gateway drug

Ninety-eight bundles containing more than 1,000 pounds of marijuana valued at \$958,000 were seized by Border Patrol agents on Jan. 24 near Ajo, Ariz., near the Barry M. Goldwater bombing range, the Associated Press reported.

That wasn't the first time the desolate area has been used as a portal into the United States by drug runners. In the Tucson Sector alone, agents seized more than 270,000 pounds of pot worth more than \$122 million — during the first three months of the fiscal year.

ment at other points of entry is funneling more foot traffic to the remoter border areas.

Last year, a congressional conference committee gutted amendments sponsored by Bishop and Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., that would have allowed Border Patrol agents to bypass environmental rules if necessary to secure the border.

On Oct. 29, Rep. Norman Dicks, D-Wash., admitted on the House floor that archaeological and environmental considerations along the 700 miles of border are more important than national security concerns.

Here's the kicker: Much of Organ Pipe has been closed to American hikers and backpackers because illegal border crossers have made it too dangerous for them to enjoy.



Barbara F. Hollingsworth is *The Examiner's* local opinion editor.