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Mission:

To make Legislative recommendations to help the Texas Border Region grow and prosper economically.



Embargoed Until 10 a.m., Thursday, February 14, 2008

**Statement by
The Honorable Chad Foster
Mayor of Eagle Pass, Texas and
Chairman of the Texas Border Coalition
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security
February 14, 2008**

Chairman Price, subcommittee members, I am speaking today for 2.1 million Americans in 14 border counties of the 1,250 mile Texas-Mexico border. Historically, our communities have endured the neglect of federal and state governments. In recent years, the tide has begun to turn as the border has emerged as one the most vibrant and dynamic regions of Texas. Ours is a region of contrasts, exhibiting differences of language, culture, tradition, and economy. The interconnectedness of our communities on both sides of the international boundary gives our region a distinct sense of place.

The Texas Border Coalition thanks you for your leadership. We ask your continued assistance in giving our communities a voice in government decisions and ask for your help in providing us the tools to advance our region.

Your 2008 bill set the performance bar high for the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection. Our region needs your help making their execution clear the bar. Their performance in the six weeks since enactment has not been encouraging. Even before the president signed your bill, we sought to begin consultations with the CBP as required by the law and were rebuffed. We were told that the CBP had "held 18 town hall meetings" that, on investigation, turned out to be meals in restaurants and phone calls. I trust that most of you have held town hall meetings in your districts, and none of you consider a private phone call between two parties to meet that definition.

In the single instance when CBP consulted with local government, a resolution has been agreed to. Last week, Hidalgo County agreed to partner with DHS to rebuild levees along the Rio Grande to create a more effective barrier to illegal entry. It does not include a fence that people seeking illegal entry can climb over, cut through or tunnel under. It is a smart solution, and we have proposed similar solutions with the Laredo Vega and Brownsville Weir projects only to be rejected without discussion or investigation. We want to work with DHS to fashion smart solutions. We need your muscle to bring them to the table and work with us.

As the Border Patrol gains greater control of the border between ports, and in Texas we are achieving control without a fence, the ports of entry come under greater stress. It is a top TBC priority that Congress give the ports of entry the personnel

and technology needed to harden their vulnerabilities. We will work with your Financial Services colleagues on needed infrastructure improvements.

According to the Government Accountability Office, we need 4,000 new officers to secure the ports of entry. The president's budget proposes 500. We understand the need to ramp up, but at this pace we will remain in danger beyond 2017. We need to double the president's number to 1,000 this year and double it again next year to 2,000 new customs agents.

The president's budget proposes to implement the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative on October 1, 2008. Whether it is implemented in 2008 or 2009, as provided by your bill, our ports of entry must be equipped to deal with the new rules. The budget does not include needed investments in technology, training, public education or testing that are essential to success.

In the face of these shortcomings, the budget proposes to cut salaries and expenses budget authority for ports of entry by \$344 million. I understand that the appropriations justification for ports of entry reduces their request by another \$300 million.

The president's plan raises questions whether the DHS commitment to secure the border is no more than hollow promise that depends on ineffective fences. The consequence of the Administration's policy would be a less safe border region, a less safe America, fewer hands on deck without the equipment they need and longer lines at the border.

The 9-11 terrorists entered the United States through ports of entry. Most undocumented aliens enter the United States through ports of entry. Most of the illegal drugs entering the United States come through ports of entry.

We need to invest in our ports of entry to protect America from terrorism, illegal drugs and unlawful entry. Without these investments, our economy will continue to falter as commerce is frustrated by growing border crossing wait times, at the expense of American jobs and economic growth.

The Texas Border Coalition believes we can do better. We urge your subcommittee to improve the Administration plan and harden security on the nation's borders.