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Mission:

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



TESTIMONY

Presented by
The Texas Border Coalition

To the
Texas House Committee on Border and Intergovernmental Affairs
81st Texas Legislature

March 23, 2009

Madam Chair and committee members, the Texas Border Coalition (TBC) represents the collective voice of Texas border mayors, county judges, and communities on issues that affect the Texas-Mexico board regional quality of life. We support economic development opportunities and sustainable incomes in a healthy and safe environment, the flow of goods and products between Texas and Mexico, and investments and incentives in transportation, immigration, ports of entry, workforce, education, healthcare and other areas vital to the fulfillment of our mission.

We strongly support Rep. Lucio III's HCR 75 and other efforts to explore alternatives to the border fence. TBC appreciates this opportunity to present our views on the construction of the wasteful border fence that is destructive to our communities, is not working, is lethal to people and wildlife and eventually will have to be torn down.

As of this time, some 70 miles of Texas fence near the Rio Grande have not been constructed.

Like your committee, the Texas Border Coalition supports smart and effective measures that will achieve true border security. We have suggested fencing alternatives in Texas, such as the Vega Project in Laredo, the Eagle Pass Park project, the Brownsville Weir and Reservoir project, and the clearing of the banks of the Rio Grande – north and south – of vegetation such as carrizo cane and salt cedar that provide hiding places for illegal border-crossers and put our Border Patrol agents at risk. We support physical barriers in areas where they make sense and are agreed to by elected county and municipal officials. We support smarter, more effective solutions where fences won't work including radar, cameras, sensors and more effective deployment of Border Patrol agents.

In most places, the border fence won't work, a fact that former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff admits to, acknowledging that illegal crossers will go around, over, through and under it. Border Patrol officials liken it more to a "speed bump" since it is only intended to slow down the immigrants by three to four minutes. The fence is more gap than barrier: the fence covers less than 370 of the 1,969 miles of U.S.-Mexican border, less than 1 mile in 5.

In Texas, the fence is being built more than a mile from the border, trapping people – workers, families, farmers, ranchers, retirees – and wildlife in a "dead zone" that is north of the Rio Grande, but south of the fence. That means that when fires, floods, medical crises or crime require evacuation, emergency or law enforcement, emergency personnel won't be able to rescue people or property. Wildlife won't be able to access the life-giving resources of the Rio Grande. People and wildlife – in many cases, endangered species – will die. Additionally, wildlife sanctuaries that have been a popular attraction for local schools will no longer be, as school districts are refusing to travel south of the fence for liability purposes. Being the only southern border state that is separated from Mexico by a river, the Texas border requires a unique solution because one size does not fit all.

Furthermore, illegal border crossing won't be controlled until the U.S. has a well-run immigration system that expands avenues for legal workers and cracks down on illegal hiring. When immigration is reformed, we won't need a Border Fence, although we will continue to require beefed up Border Patrol and Customs forces to halt illegal drug smuggling. The Border Fence will be torn down.

We represent many of the communities that are most directly impacted by the border fence, and we welcome the attention of Rep. Lucio and this committee to our concerns. We are also seeking the attention of Secretary Janet Napolitano, but are fearful that we are out of time as the bureaucracy continues to build momentum to initiate construction before the Secretary gains control of the department. We are unwilling to leave any stone unturned in our efforts to halt the destruction of our local communities. We need your help.

SUMMARY

The Texas Border Coalition strongly supports HCR 75 and we welcome the assistance of Rep. Lucio III, this committee and the Texas Legislature to convince Congress and the Obama Administration to conduct an appropriate review of the current plans to start new fence construction. We firmly believe that a thorough review of the facts will lead to a conclusion that a moratorium on construction is necessary and that a careful review of our nation's border security strategy will produce a more effective and less expensive program to secure America's homeland.