

Focus on agriculture

Putting law, order on the border

By **Erik Leroy Ness**
For the Las Cruces Bulletin

Dudley Williams can see Mexico from his ranch on the common and conflicted international border in southern New Mexico. He has also seen firsthand the problems caused by smuggling and other illegal activities, which are part of the daily landscape for ranchers and farmers all along the 1,969-mile border that stretches from Brownsville, Texas, to San Diego.

When word got out that the U.S. government was considering creating federal wilderness areas along this border, ranchers were concerned. The ranchers contend such federal designations will hamstring law enforcement agencies, especially the U.S. Border Patrol, since there are strict rules about vehicle use in designated wilderness areas.

As Williams points out, "You can't even ride a bicycle in a federal wilderness area."

While that is part of this story, the other part of the tale is the fact that ranchers in New Mexico got organized and have worked

diligently for almost four years to inform the non-ranching public about all sides of the wilderness debate.

Their organization started out with a handful of families and grew to a coalition of more than 800 businesses and organizations opposed to this move. The New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau joined the effort and

produced a documentary film covering both sides of the issue. Pro-wilderness factions worked just as hard to tell their side of the story and the debate has become one of the key public policy issues along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Pressure from the ranching group led to some amendments to the proposed legislation directly reflecting their concerns about public safety and national security, including allowing low-level surveillance flights and some law enforcement buffer zones. However,

these ranchers have plenty of experience with the federal bureaucracy and its many failed promises on wilderness issues.

They point to the ongoing security concerns created by locked-up federal land

“ Ranchers in New Mexico got organized ... to inform the non-ranching public about all sides. ”

on the Arizona border, including the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge and the Organ Pipe National Monument. Janice Kephart is an internationally recognized border security expert who served as counsel to the 9/11 Commission. In her recent report for the Center for Immigration Studies, she points out that, "nearly the entire expanse of both of these wilderness parks has been negatively impacted by illegal activity."

The rancher/farmer group called People for Preserving Our Western Heritage is now concerned that there may be a last minute move in the current lame duck session of Congress to pass an omnibus public lands bill that could include a quarter of a million acres of proposed wilderness in New Mexico on and near the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition, a proposal to turn the Devil's Staircase in Oregon into a federal wilderness and to expand the Alpine Lakes Wilderness in Washington state could also be in the grab-bag bill.

New Mexico Sen. Jeff Bingaman is chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural

Resource Committee and is the sponsor of S. 1689, which would create the vast areas of wilderness along the border even though many of these areas do not fit the strict criteria for "wilderness" set forth in the enabling legislation passed in 1964.

People for Preserving Our Western Heritage has come up with alternate land designations that would protect the lands in question, but keep them out from under what they consider the stringent strings attached to federal wilderness designations.

Border security expert Kephart concludes in her report that S. 1689 will, "provide the Border Patrol with little ability and little incentive to do its job under law, let alone state, local and other federal law enforcement." She says actual conservation of public lands would be better served by, "protecting our public safety and national security with adequate law enforcement and infrastructure."

The ranchers who live and work in this rugged outlaw country certainly agree with that assessment.