

Implications of the Big Hatchet Mountain Wilderness Prospect

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The view from Big Hatchet Peak at night is something to behold. At least 125 miles of isolation and “big lonesome” dominate and reduce all civilized things across the vast radius of this vista. To the south is Mexico. Pin points of lights from villages and widely scattered ranches can be seen. The glow of larger towns and cities like Agua Prieta and Janos reflect on distant cloud cover, but mostly, the sheer immensity of this isolated land in darkness resonates into your senses. To the north, lights of New Mexico towns Silver City, Deming, and Lordsburg can be seen. To the east, lights from El Paso and Las Cruces glow. As daylight advances, the view alters and physical features become prominent. Animas Mountain to the west reaches into the same rarified air as Big Hatchet. The bluffs and points of Big Hatchet disappear vertically away from the summit. If you are inclined to feel faint at the prospect of hanging out into space to look over the edge, this is not the place for the weak of heart. This is nature at its rawest, and the physical demands and dangers are matched only by the illicit human activities going on around the clock in this big isolated country. This is one of the most active corridors of human and dope smuggling along the U.S. and Mexican border. This is the “Boot Heel” of New Mexico. The international border surrounds you on the south and the east.

In the midst of this isolation is a man-made device that could be compared to something as out of place as a contraption placed from a space vehicle on the surface of Mars or Venus. It is a communications device placed by Customs and Border Protection-Office of Border Patrol (CBP-BP) under a permit from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the agency charged with administering the federal lands dominating the entire region. It is there to receive and relay electronic signals from across the eastern half of the entire Boot Heel area. Such devices are a vital tool in monitoring and controlling illegal entry from Mexico in this immense area. They meet the technological need to have line of sight contact with a receiver that can relay readings to a Border Patrol monitoring center. Big Hatchet is the dominating physical feature that both creates the need for such a collector and provides the location from which the signals are relayed. It would seem to the uninformed that the CBP-BP and BLM would be united in the need for placement and operation of a device with such importance in the National Security effort. The truth is they don't share the same missions and are both influenced and administered by federal government bureaucracies dominated by very different political agendas.

For several recent years this relay was not operational. It had been placed on the mountain by the BP without official BLM approval. Why such an important link in

communication was not authorized can be explained in part by the nature of the service it provided. The BP is not in the business of announcing to the world where and when monitoring devices are placed. If such information is made known, it is not just the good guys who will be aware of such placement. The bad guys are the individuals making their living running dope and human delivery services, and their success depends on their ability to avoid detection. If an important piece of detection equipment is taken out, it makes their job much easier to accomplish.

Conflict concerning placement of the repeater arose when environmental groups demanded its removal from Big Hatchet, which lies within a Wilderness Study Area (WSA), and must be managed under the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act of 1976. As a man-made technical device (there without a permit), the sensor repeater was not allowed. The environmentalists claimed it would interfere with lambing of the resident big horn sheep and existence of lesser and Mexican long nose bats found in abundance in a large cave in the area. The BP complied with the BLM order, and the repeater was shut down.

As time passed and illegal activities increased, pressure and criticism arose calling for reinstallation of the repeater. The public was not aware that the entire

east half of the Boot Heel was without a repeater. A huge, dangerous, black hole existed on the American border. Retired Border Patrol Sector Chief Gene Wood has repeatedly called attention to how corridors of entry into the United States develop. He describes active entry points as “soft points”, and they become more active based on the inability of the BP to monitor, patrol, and interdict traffic. A growing number of folks are now aware that the intensity of activity in this isolated area is the culmination of conditions that have contributed to this “soft point” of entry. The absence of the repeater on Big Hatchet Mountain was a primary, contributing factor.

How big did the problem become? In the BLM's Environmental Assessment completed in 2006 and allowing the reinstallation of the repeater, it was noted that illegal mechanical traffic increased by 671 percent and foot traffic increased by 348 percent during the first six months of fiscal year 2006 compared to the same period the previous year. The report stated that “the danger posed to the families of the people who are perceived to assist the Border Patrol by calling in illegal traffic is potentially devastating.” In the absence of the repeater, local input was limited to that form of communication. The U.S., through political jousting, put local residents and BP agents alike in a difficult and dangerous position.

In 2008, the repeater was reinstalled. It is there by the authority of a Memorandum of Understanding between the BLM and the CBP-BP, but it is a conditional allowance. The condition is that if the U.S. Congress changes the current land designation from WSA to Wilderness, “the CBP-BP must remove all communication site equipment from the Big Hatchet Wilderness as soon as possible.” It is obvious how that will impact illegal activity and national security. The question of how such a demand impacts other areas and issues must be asked.

To the east of Hidalgo County where Big Hatchet lies, there is an active proposal to designate 358,000 acres of Luna and Doña Ana Counties as wilderness. Over 150,000 acres of that proposal lie in the Potrillo Mountains just north of the border between Columbus and Santa Teresa, NM. The same condition of WSA designation exists in that proposed area. If wilderness designation is passed by Congress, residents are worried that environmentalists' demands for the removal of all technical monitoring gear along with elimination of mechanical access will be

imposed on the operation of the CBP-BP, which stands between residents and the drug lords and coyotes of the smuggling rings in Mexico. "All we know and see on a piece of paper is the demand for the Border Patrol to remove their monitoring gear from Big Hatchet Mountain if wilderness designation occurs on that WSA. How can we possibly believe that the same thing wouldn't be repeated here in Luna County," stated rancher Bill Smyer. "Push comes to shove, we will bear the burden of any downside. Our government constantly elevates environmentalists' demands above the concerns and safety of anyone gainfully employed and trying to stay in business! We have no champion."

It is ironic that the only legal agreements in place on this and other WSAs are grazing permits between agencies of the U.S. government and local ranchers. The primary burden of performance is placed solely on the agency trying to maintain national security, CBP-BP. They can have their repeater in place only on a conditional basis, and they cannot rely on having helicopter access on an ongoing basis. From January through April and from June through October 15 they have to make the half day climb up Big Hatchet Mountain on foot to service their facility. The BLM, under demand by several environmental groups, won't allow helicopter disturbance that may affect the big horns and the bats. If wilderness is declared here or elsewhere on the border, the conditions will only get more stringent and limiting. The question needs to be asked, "How can any national leader support a process that inhibits or destroys the ability of a U.S. agency and local residents to control, protect, and enhance their lives and livelihoods with a satisfactory degree of safety and efficiency?" An observation made by a resident who would be affected by wilderness designation in Doña Ana County provides significant insight. He said, "There is a big difference between being in the crowd cheering and being in the arena fighting for your life. We must find leaders who have at least visited the floor of the arena, or we will not prevail. Remember, if we rely on the crowd, they will only cheer when we are killed."

Editor's note: This article is one in a series written by members and friends of People for Preserving Our Western Heritage. www.peopleforwesternheritage.com

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