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Threats and Degradation

A congressman uncovers two buried studies showing the impacts of illegal immigration, smuggling

by [Leo W. Banks](#)

The federal government's border fence has been called the Tortilla Curtain. But in the swamp of border politics, there's a more effective barrier at play, one that filters ideas rather than people. It explains why most Americans still don't fully understand the disaster on our southern border.

This tortilla curtain is propped up by much of the major media, activist groups and cheap-labor-addicted businesses, big and small. They're all spinning us, for their own reasons.

But the list includes the feds, too.

More than anything, bureaucrats want to convince you of the great job they're doing. If the facts say otherwise, they'll sanitize, sugar-coat and sometimes suppress—which a Utah congressman believes has been the case with two blockbuster studies, 7 and 5 years old, that have never seen daylight, until now.

The Bush administration's Department of the Interior did both. They were intended to measure the impacts of illegal immigration and drug-smuggling on Interior Department-managed lands in Arizona.

The first, from 2002, was a threat assessment for such places as Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and the Tohono O'odham Nation.

It concluded the threat was great indeed, both from the surge of aliens and drug smugglers who are "decimating public resources," and from the invitation the open border offered terrorists.

The study said bad guys could easily cross into Arizona using established trails and a pre-existing labor pool of \$10-a-day mules who "do not care, or want to know, what they are smuggling."

The second study, from 2004, looked at how the open border impacted Sonoran Desert wilderness in southwest Arizona, mainly Organ Pipe. This picture was equally grim—for the land, for endangered species and for the whole concept of border wilderness.

Both studies noted that the Border Patrol policy of blocking entry around cities and border ports pushed this illegal activity into remote areas.

All of this sounds like information a good citizen would need to decide how to vote, and a good lawmaker would need to make wise policy. So why did Bush, and then Barack Obama, try to bury both studies?

The wilderness study in particular was handled oddly. It was presented at a 2004 meeting of a borderlands managers' group of public officials who gather regularly in Tucson to talk about border issues.

Fred Patton, one of the study's authors and former chief ranger at Organ Pipe, made the presentation. No one in the room was given a hard copy of the content.

Even these hardened public lands officials were taken aback by what they heard.

Former Forest Service district ranger Keith Graves, who was at the meeting, remembers Patton saying that if someone asked him whether Organ Pipe was an appropriate place for a national monument today, he'd say no.



According to Graves, Patton added the wilderness at Organ Pipe had been so degraded less than 10 percent still met that designation.

"We thought this study was going to be great to show the impacts," says Graves, now a liaison between Forest Service and the Secure Border Initiative. "But we never heard about it again."

Congressman Rob Bishop, ranking Republican on the Parks and Public Lands Subcommittee, first heard about the desert wilderness study in April, and began asking the Obama administration's Interior Department for a copy.

It finally came, after 10 weeks, when Bishop gave the study's verbatim title to the Interior Department. He says he was stonewalled and sees the delay as a pattern that makes him mad as hell—search YouTube for a video of Bishop haranguing Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

The *Tucson Weekly* tried to find out why these studies were never released and got the same treatment.

Daniel Wirth, who did the threat assessment, said his study was "law-enforcement sensitive," and it apparently still is. When pressed with more questions, Wirth said he needed permission from his bosses at the Interior Department, where he's southwest border coordinator for law enforcement and security. But that permission didn't come.

Patton, who still works for the Interior Department, didn't respond to two e-mails. Lee Baiza, superintendent at Organ Pipe, said he's never seen the wilderness study documenting the degradation of the land he manages.

"I've heard reference to it," he said. "But I never saw it ... not that I can recall." Asked if he wanted to see it, Baiza said flatly, "No. A lot of things have changed. We're moving forward."

Kendra Barkoff, press secretary to Salazar, repeated Wirth's "law-enforcement sensitive" claim, adding, "This took place before our time here."

She added that the department under Bush had not followed up on the studies, and that the department under Obama has no plans to do so, either. She said the studies aren't newsworthy. "I don't think it comes as a surprise terrorists can come into the country any way they want to," said Barkoff. She told the *Weekly* to call the Department of Homeland Security.

As Bishop wrangled with Interior to get the wilderness study, he also acquired the threat assessment. His reaction to both?

"I was flabbergasted," says Bishop. "I could not imagine any situation as dangerous and threatening to this country as what we're seeing along the border, especially in Arizona. Any country, to be sovereign, has to at least control its land. You cannot turn over areas to drug cartels, with the potential of terrorists coming through, and that is the situation we have on the southern border."

Significantly, he added: "We've received no information that the threat potential is markedly different today."

Bishop believes we are sacrificing public lands on the border to the wilderness designation. By restricting Border Patrol's access to border wilderness, we effectively turn these lands over to bad guys, leading to their degradation. He made that case in *The Washington Times* on Nov. 16.

The issue is relevant, in part because of a proposal to make the Tumacacori Highlands, near Nogales, a wilderness. These events also are evidence of how nothing much changes. Back in 2004, at roughly the time the Interior Department was producing these studies, David Aguilar, head of the Border Patrol, met with reporters in Laredo, Texas, and declared the border secure.

He's still the Border Patrol chief today. Homeland Security boss Janet Napolitano recently came out with a similar declaration.

Read the National Park Service report on the Organ Pipe National Monument [here](#).

Read the 2002 Threat Assessment for Public Lands report [here](#).

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