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## Wildlife areas on border let in outlaws

[Sara A. Carter \(Contact\)](#)

Heavily armed outlaws are threatening national parks and other public lands along the Mexican border, where terrain and environmental concerns limit the range of U.S. Border Patrol agents and are complicating efforts to build a barrier ordered by Congress.

The Department of Homeland Security has allocated about \$50 million to counter the ecological impact on land managed by the Interior Department and other government agencies.

But environmentalists, energized by the Democratic leadership of Congress and the White House, are pushing for additional conservation measures that Border Patrol agents fear will make it easier for Mexican gangs to operate.

Numerous Border Patrol agents interviewed by The Washington Times said drug smugglers and human traffickers are using ecologically diverse sanctuaries to evade law enforcement officials, whose access is limited in some areas to foot patrols and horseback.

Zack Taylor, a retired agent and supervisor who spent 26 years patrolling the Texas and Arizona border, said the creation of federally protected wilderness areas threatens to keep "the agency in a reactionary mode rather than proactively tackling the increasing dangers on the border."

"The cartels want to keep their access to the north and welcome the creation of new wilderness areas that are easier to traverse for them than the ones they are already using," Mr. Taylor said.

Rep. Ciro D. Rodriguez, a Texas Democrat whose district includes Big Bend National Park among other state and federal land, said he is seeking balance between protecting the environment and securing the border.

"Number one: We need better coordination and additional park police, as well as other Border Patrol people," Mr. Rodriguez said.

However, he said he doubts that parks have become major transit areas for contraband goods or illegal immigrants.

"Most of the contraband items do not come through our national parks, though. The smugglers make their way to the U.S. mainly through the port of entries," Mr. Rodriguez said.

A dozen Republican congressmen who disagree have asked the Government

Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate the roles and conditions of U.S. officers on public lands managed by the Interior Department and the Forest Service, which is part of the Agriculture Department.

One of the lawmakers, Rep. Rob Bishop, Utah Republican, said the group was responding to complaints from border agents and other federal law enforcement officers.

"We seem to have seceded certain parts of the United States to drug runners, smugglers and some of the most vicious cartels operating along the border," said Mr. Bishop, ranking Republican on the House Natural Resources subcommittee on national parks, forests and public lands.

As reports of violence along the border increase, the GAO study will present a comprehensive look at security in "vast wilderness regions," Mr. Bishop said. "We want to know: Is there some way to quantify the problem so it's not just anecdotal."

Environmentalists are eager to save endangered plants and animals.

Earlier this year at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in Cameron County, Texas, a visitor took a photograph of a medium-size cat that had not been seen in the region for 10 years.

Oliver Bernstein, spokesman for the Sierra Club in Austin, Texas, said the group is "asking for a freeze on border wall construction and a comprehensive review of border wall construction." He said the club is hopeful that the Obama administration and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano "will be more understanding of the complexities on the border" than the George W. Bush administration.

The Secure Fence Act of 2006 authorized the Homeland Security Department to construct 670 miles of fences and access roads.

As homeland security secretary in the Bush administration, Michael Chertoff issued two waivers easing environmental regulations so that construction of 300 miles of vehicle fences and 370 miles of pedestrian barriers could proceed.

Conservationists argue that the construction of fences, roads and extensive lights would lead to the demise of ecologically diverse areas, and business leaders fear that an effective barrier would destroy the economies of border cities by preventing Mexicans from crossing into the U.S. to shop.

About 1.1 million acres of federal wildlife refuge, two national forests, five American Indian reservations and eight national parks account for more than 40 percent of the border region.

Mexican drug cartels are adept at exploiting gaps in the border.

Drug runners have spotters on the mountainsides watching federal law enforcement officers on the roads below. Along the San Diego border, drug spotters sit on the hillsides with binoculars and guns taunting agents. Mexican drug runners account for more than 90

percent of cocaine and more than half of the heroin entering the U.S.

Inside Arizona's Tohono O'odham Nation, spotters sit high in the canyon crevasses inside the U.S. to guide contraband and smugglers through the American Indian reservation, which is the size of Connecticut.

Agents on the front line say they can't do their jobs if they are impeded by laws that keep them from areas used to move illegal goods and people into the U.S.

"It's theater," said a Border Patrol agent in Texas, who asked for anonymity because of fear of reprisal. "We face obstacles on every corner. ... In fact, we're sitting ducks out here and thousands of people cross the U.S. border daily."

The number of recorded assaults on Border Patrol agents was 1,097 last year and has been "climbing steadily for the past five years," said T.J. Bonner, president of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents about 15,000 of the 18,000 agents in the force.

"We're becoming much more acutely aware of how vulnerable we are," a senior Border Patrol official said on the condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal. "Yet nothing has changed."