

OFFICE OF THE SHERIFF  
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

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**Testimony of Sheriff Tony Estrada to Congressman Raul Grijalva's congressional ad-hoc hearing**

I would like to begin by thanking Congressman Grijalva for providing me this opportunity to address one of the major issues in our country today – namely the safety and security of the border areas. I feel that I am uniquely qualified to address this topic in that I have spent 40 years in various law enforcement positions in and around Nogales and in currently in my fifth term as sheriff of Santa Cruz County. While I was born across the line in Mexico, I obtained my education here after my family immigrated to Nogales, Arizona. I remain a bilingual, bicultural resident who came up from extreme poverty to become someone who has fully realized the American dream. I still live in a home a few short blocks from the border.

That being said, and despite my understanding of life in what we call the Ambos Nogales area, my first and foremost concern as sheriff is to promote the reality that Santa Cruz County is a very safe, very secure area, especially given that we do not have a natural buffer between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. There is no Rio Grande River to separate us or a dangerous desert wilderness that even the most hardy find life-threatening, such as even Tucson enjoys. We are literally back-to-back neighbors, which is one reason that there have been at least 70 tunnels discovered connecting the two sides of the border, built exclusively to transport drugs and undocumented crossers. In fact, I would not be surprised that there might remain undiscovered tunnels serving as a conduit as I speak these words. However, it is definitely not raining bullets in Santa Cruz County.

There are a variety of reasons why Nogales and other communities in Santa Cruz County enjoy a lifestyle that is almost free from violent crimes. First of all, we have the highest ratio of law enforcement personnel to residents in the country. There are about 1,000 U.S. Border Patrol agents serving in Santa Cruz County – more than 10 times the number from just three decades ago. In addition, there are numerous other law enforcement agencies from the local Nogales Police Department to my own Sheriff's Office, and dozens of law enforcement personnel from other state and federal agencies.

Next, Nogales and residential Santa Cruz County is merely a conduit, an area that funnels drug smugglers and the undocumented to more metropolitan areas within Arizona and throughout the nation. Those who conduct this trade do not want to draw attention to themselves or to bring down the wrath of the law enforcement community before they reach their real destinations. The crimes committed here are mostly related to property, such as shop lifting and burglary, but even these have decreased greatly over the past few years.

That is not to say there is not violence along the border because there is. There were three (3) undocumented aliens murdered in a single incident and a single incident of rape of two undocumented women all of which occurred in remote areas of the county. However, it is mostly contained within the outer, most remote regions of the county.

Thanks to a combination of increased law enforcement presence, a reinforced border fence, and the most modern technology for detecting movement, the perpetrators have been forced to cross outside of inhabited areas. The violence that does occur is almost exclusively confined to criminal acts committed against border crossers themselves. Robbery and rape are common but most cases go unreported; as well dozens die every year after being abandoned by those to whom they have paid large sums of money to get them to a metropolitan area such as Tucson or Phoenix.

The fact that there is little violence in Nogales, Arizona or residential areas of Santa Cruz County does not mean the U.S. government can relax its vigilance. The only reason that there is such a dynamic trade in illegal drugs is because there is such a huge demand throughout America. While there has been a dramatic decline in crossings by the undocumented looking for work, given the scarcity of jobs during this Great Recession, there are still thousands from Mexico and Central America who are willing to cross into the U.S. because despite its dangers, the alternative of trying to scratch out a living in Mexico is a worse alternative.

We must view the presence of local, state, and federal law enforcement like a finger in the dyke. To ease up on the protection now enjoyed is to open a small crack that will eventually become a flood. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 has helped to divert the potential for violence, but there is no cause to relax or cut back. The fact that the residents of Nogales and Santa Cruz County enjoy a level of safety far above many neighborhoods in Tucson and Phoenix should not be a catalyst for reduced enforcement. If anything, it should stand as a role model of what can be achieved when local, state, and federal agencies work together for a common cause.

The border remains active and lively. A very thin line separates Santa Cruz County with its population of about 45,000 from a very poor, very tenuous metropolis in Mexico of about 400,000. We in law enforcement have a responsibility of protecting our own residents, visitors to the border area, and even those who cross illegally from predators whose sole goal is to make money no matter what they have to do to continue the flow of dollars into their coffers.

The bottom line? There is no sealing the border completely. The longer the fence becomes, the more sophisticated the technology, the stronger the law enforcement presence, the greater the level of safety for those living near Mexico. Forcing the drug and people smugglers ever outward to more remote areas is both a blessing and a curse. As long as there are those in the U.S. who will purchase drugs and as long as the economy of Mexico is below that of the U.S. even with our economic challenges, there will be those who will do whatever it takes to cross.

This does not even address the very real threat that the next terrorist attack could come from the south.

Protecting the border area never has been and should never be the sole responsibility of local law enforcement personnel. The isolated incidents of violence against a rancher or even law enforcement personnel may not be justification for keeping up the pressure, Congressman Grijalva, but the alternative is one that could impact every American regardless of where he or she resides. Whether or not it is raining bullets here, we need to make sure it never does anywhere.