

Wilderness opponents come to BIA-SNM

National security a top concern for group

By **BETH SITZLER**
The Las Cruces Bulletin

The possible negative effect of designated federal wilderness on the county's southern border was discussed during the monthly dinner meeting of the Building Industry Association of Southern New Mexico (BIA-SNM) Tuesday, Feb. 16.

Rancher and People for Preserving Our Western Heritage member Steve Wilmeth and retired Chief Border Patrol Agent Gene Wood spoke to the association about their concerns for S.1689, a bill designating certain Doña Ana County lands as components of the National Wilderness Preservation System and the National Landscape Conservation System, and its effect on national security.

"I'm here as a result of the wilderness proposal," Wilmeth said. "I'm concerned for a number of reasons."

He said his major concern is that, if passed, the bill would restrict Border Patrol agent access to the Potrillo Mountains complex.

"It's an issue for me and I believe it's an issue for you," he said. "Gene and I are allies in an issue few people know about and need to know more about."

'Wilderness on the Border'

Wilmeth presented a video he made titled "Wilderness on the Border: A Story of Danger and Destruction Untold to U.S. Citizens." Along with discussing the history of illegal trafficking and the formation of the Border Patrol, the video also examined conditions on the Arizona-Mexico border, specifically the Organ Pipe National Monument.

Due to legislative restrictions on federal designated wilderness, Arizona Border Patrol agents were no longer allowed to canvas these areas, which had become ideal for those crossing the border illegally, including drug and human smugglers.

"The 'welcome' mat was laid out and the news spread quickly," Wilmeth says in the video.

The video went on to depict the vast amount of damage caused to the landscape and wilderness by those illegally crossing the border, who have made roads and trails, started fires and discarded waste.



BETH SITZLER | The Las Cruces Bulletin

Retired Chief Border Patrol Agent Gene Wood and Steve Wilmeth, a rancher and member of People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, spoke during the Building Industry Association of Southern New Mexico monthly dinner meeting Tuesday, Feb. 16. See related story on Page A1.

Because of the damage, park service officials at Organ Pipe National Monument conducted a study of the area and found the non-wilderness areas, in which Border Patrol had full access, were less impacted than the designated wilderness areas, the video stated.

According to the video, a report by the Department of Interior's High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) program found, "many Department of Interior lands can no longer be used safely by the public due to pervasive smuggling."

A HIDTA aerostats report examined smuggling activity in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona from 2002 to 2003. While Texas had the least amount of radar contacts and apprehensions per mile of border, Arizona was "off the chart," most likely because of the state's lack of rancher controlled land, Wilmeth says in the video.

"The difference in frequency of radar contact and apprehension across Texas, New Mexico and Arizona is shocking and should immediately create a strong desire to discover what is happening in Texas that isn't

happening in Arizona," Wilmeth says in the video.

The video concluded by saying that the information found in the study by the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior Threat Assessment shows a serious threat to national security that needs to be addressed.

"Shouldn't national security and halting human and drug smuggling trump environmental idealism?" Wilmeth says in the video. "New Mexico must have leadership that doesn't allow the mistakes of Arizona to occur on the southern border."

Threats to security, safety

After the video, Wood spoke about his experience with the Border Patrol and emphasized the importance of having access to the border. He said the Border Patrol isn't opposed to wilderness-designated areas, but is opposed to any actions that put national and public safety at risk.

Wood, who said he wasn't speaking on behalf of current Border Patrol Agents, added that the wilderness designation will leave the country open to smugglers, illegal aliens and terrorists.

According to Homeland Security, in 2005, 19,500 illegal aliens from what the agency considers to be terrorist countries crossed into the country, Wood said.

"We can only address this issue by having boots on the ground," he said. "(This video) is visual proof of what happens when these areas are not protected."

Wood said the designation places unrealistic restrictions on Border Patrol agents.

"National security is one of the most important issues facing the country today," he said.

When asked how the Organ Mountains come into play, Wilmeth said the issue isn't as prevalent since the area is less intrusive and invasive to illegal traffic than the Potrillo Mountains complex.

"We can't have wilderness in the Potrillos, we can't have wilderness on the border," he said.

For more information on People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, visit www.peopleforwesternheritage.com.

“We can't have wilderness in the Potrillos, we can't have wilderness on the border.”

STEVE WILMETH,
People for Preserving Our
Western Heritage

Home Sales Scoreboard

LAS CRUCES AREA

	This Week	Last Week	Same Week Last Year
Closed Sales New Homes	4	3	4

Closed Sales Existing Homes	10	15	10
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Pending Home Sales (All)	200	195	174
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	This Week	Last Week	Same Week Last Year
Average Days on Market (All)	98	80	88

	This Week	Last Week	Same Week Last Year
Median Price New	\$160,210	\$182,175	\$135,525

Median Price Existing	\$145,000	\$180,000	\$151,524
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	This Week	Last Week	Same Week Last Year
Total Homes on Market (All)	1,217	1,209	1,320

Real Estate Agents	450	449	559
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"Homes" include detached single-family homes, townhomes and condominiums

Source: Las Cruces Multiple Listing Service (MLS)* for the period 2/8/10 - 2/14/10
* MLS is wholly owned by the Las Cruces Association of Realtors
** Unknown per LCAR

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