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Their View: Don't shackle border with wilderness bill

By Tom Cooper / For the Sun-News

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A Open Letter to New Mexico Senators Bingaman and Udall and Congressman Teague

Will we be able to secure the U. S./Mexico border, or will it be impossible? With the U. S. Border Patrol denied access for routine patrol in federally designated wilderness areas along Arizona's border and with new corridors and safe havens for illegal activities in wilderness along the border in NM, how would securing the border be possible?

Our community has provided evidence of strong opposition to S.B. 1689, "The Organ Mountains - Desert Peaks Wilderness Act." Listed among those opposing the legislation are the National Association of Former Border Patrol Officers, Doña Ana County and New Mexico Farm & Livestock Bureaus, Greater Las Cruces and Hatch Valley chambers of commerce, People for Preserving our Western Heritage, New Mexico Federal Lands Council, New Mexico Cattle Growers Association, Building Industry Association of Southern New Mexico, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District, the Coalition of AZ - NM Counties, numerous other organizations, 14 range management professionals and 800 businesses including many major businesses in Las Cruces and Doña Ana County. These organizations and business owners represent thousands of members and employees who are your constituents.

Opposition to federal wilderness designations was

initially based on the non-existence of wilderness characteristics, a preference for no designation or a significantly

less restrictive designation, loss of most historic access for the public, for Border Patrol and all law enforcement, and for the ranchers and the loss of ranchers' property rights and ability to continue their ranching operations.

While these concerns remain, opposition has grown significantly in view of the flood control and water management issues, which have arisen and with increased awareness of rampant drug and human trafficking, national security concerns, the inherent danger to U.S. citizens and desecration of the land in wilderness and national monuments on and near the border in Arizona. Those "protected areas" have become heavily used corridors for illegal and dangerous activities. Photos and videos of the areas show the devastation wrought by the tens of thousands of illegals streaming into Arizona every month, creating roads, trails and erosion, and trashing the areas, each leaving behind an estimated eight pounds of trash in the form of bottles, cans, diapers and other waste. Some areas have been declared biohazard sites. Some are closed to the public due to safety concerns. As is typical, ranching has been eliminated from the areas.

The National Association of Former Border Patrol Officers believes that as Arizona strengthens its efforts to deal with these problems, new corridors will be created elsewhere. They believe designation of wilderness in Doña Ana and Luna counties would cause creation of corridors in the Potrillo Mountains area, and substantially increase illegal traffic and crime in all areas included in the legislation.

Incredibly, a few environmental activists have continued to push for 241,400 acres (377 square

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miles) of wilderness in eight areas and for two national conservation areas including 99,100 acres (155 square miles). They have no regard for the expected impacts to our communities and our counties. More than 75 percent of the proposed wilderness acreage lies in four areas which in their entirety are less than 25 miles from the border. Border Patrol and all law enforcement would be denied access for routine patrol in all of the wilderness areas, a primary factor causing the literally out-of-control conditions in Arizona.

Coalition for Western Heritage and Open Space, and more.

We ask you not to repeat Arizona's mistakes by designating wilderness or national monuments near the border in New Mexico. The risks are far too serious. In fact, there is every reason to believe it would bring all the negative impacts Arizona is experiencing. Designation of wilderness or national monuments anywhere within 100 miles of the border is a serious mistake, as evidenced by conditions in designated wilderness in the Tucson and Phoenix areas as well as those along the border. Passage of S.B. 1689 would drastically increase smuggling, interdictions, desecration and environmental damage to the land, dangerous and life threatening incidents and the number of illegal aliens in our state.

We need to secure the border. We ask you not to impose S.B. 1689 on our counties, our state and our country. It is, in all sincerity, beyond belief that you would consider doing so.

Tom Cooper ranches in Doña Ana and Otero counties, and served for three years as Chairman of People for Preserving our Western Heritage. His ranch in Doña Ana County would be impacted by three separate wilderness areas and a national conservation area under S.B. 1689. Visit www.peopleforwesternheritage.com to view "Wilderness on the Border" and other videos, the listing of

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