

Testimony of Othal Brand

Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

March 17, 2015 HSGAC Hearing (Border Security)

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today on this very important subject.

- My name is Othal Brand, Jr., and I would like to tell you about my experience living and working on the Rio Grande in South Texas.
- I have lived in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas for 60 years.
- My family farmed on and by the Rio Grande River for 43 years.
- We were the largest fruit and vegetable packer in the state of Texas for over a quarter of a century. We were the largest onion grower in the United States for over a quarter century. We owned several thousand acres of land on the river. We had small colonias (unincorporated neighborhoods) on our land with their own general store.
- I serve in an elected position for a water district and have done so for ten years. The water district has a pump station below the border wall on the embankment of the river. It draws its water from an inlet of the Rio Grande River. We supply a majority of the drinking water for the city of McAllen, which has a population of 135,000 people. McAllen is the largest city in the county of Hidalgo and is the 20th largest in Texas. We pump 15,000 acre-feet of water a year.

What was it like in past years:

- It was a very relaxed atmosphere with no sense of danger. As a teenager, I would swim, water-ski, swing off trees, picnic, BBQ and camp out on the river. People had travel trailers and cabins on the river.

What has it been like in recent years:

- According to our Sheriff –(and he cites federal statistics)- 53 percent of all illegal crossers came into the United States through Hidalgo County, my county.

- Anzalduas Park is next to Anzalduas Dam on the Rio Grande River. We used to picnic there. Next to nobody uses it today. It is too dangerous.
- When the government had Sequestration, the very next day and for several weeks, we had dozens of illegals coming across the river. They did 20,000 dollars of damage to our property in the weeks that followed.
- All the entertaining and fun activities that occurred on the river years ago are no more. All of the buildings and homes that we owned and leased on the river have been torn down. Nobody lives there now.
- My irrigation district workers have been shot at twice, apparently not to kill them, but rather to scare them or chase them off so that the trans-national gangs could haul more drugs across.
- We would have what the Border Patrol calls splash-downs. The drug dealers would be chased back to our facility, drive off the embankment into the river, take the drugs out and haul them back to Mexico. The last time Border Patrol cleaned out the river in front of our channel, they pulled out five cars with one still loaded with drugs. There would be several men on the Mexican side who would come out of the brush to grab the drugs and take them back to try another day.
- The county of Hidalgo has 1,582 square miles and 22 incorporated cities which comprise 200 square miles of the county. That leaves 1,382 square miles who's primary law enforcement entity is the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Department with only 139 patrolling officers. This is equal to the same number of patrolling officers in the McAllen Police Department. (McAllen has 47 square miles). The difficulty of securing the safety of life and property outside of the cities of Hidalgo County is a huge challenge to law enforcement and is also an incentive to the criminal element. If what Hidalgo County has was replicated in Washington, D.C., the capital would have just six officers patrolling the streets.

What has our water district done to help?

- When I became manager of the water district, we were having illegal traffic every day. It was either human or drug trafficking. I said to my workers, "Why do you not call?" They said, "If we call, they will know it was us." I said to myself that this is not the work environment I want for these men. That is not what America is about.

- I put up street lights, thinking that would scare them off. It did not, but rather, it allowed them to see better at night.
- Border Patrol put up a portable, manned tower with a \$65,000 camera that had infra-red, thermal imaging and night vision. It stopped them from crossing there.
- Next, I put in towers and cameras for the water district and then gave the Border Patrol access to those towers and cameras. This helped a lot.
- To stop the splash downs, we put up Jersey Barriers across our embankment. That stopped the splash downs.
- At the Border Patrol's request, we put up more floodlights, so if you go to our water district at night, it is lit up like a Christmas tree.
- We put in a boat ramp and a helicopter pad for Border Patrol approximately four years ago. It is the only permanent one that Border Patrol has access to on the river from McAllen to the Gulf of Mexico. Our boat ramp, the "Jaime Zapata Launch Point", has allowed federal and state law enforcement to have 18 boats at our facility on a rotating 24/7 basis. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars were spent on the ramp.

What about the Border Wall?

- Our pumping station is on what some would call the Mexican side of the border wall. They put the Border Wall right up the middle of our 45-acres, splitting out property in two.
- The Border Wall helps. It has deterred. Little children and women are not going over that wall. Young boys get over the wall with a ladder. Now they have to try to get through a gate.
- I have tried to make our district, which is below the wall and therefore vulnerable, as secure as possible to guarantee the safety of our workers and to assist law enforcement.

Here are my recommendations and suggested Force Multipliers:

- As a nation, we are doing more than we have ever done before, but we still have traffic. The aerostats and the drones are great but they are what I would call a fair-weather system. When it is overcast, the drones

are worthless. When the winds are high, the aerostats have to be pulled down.

- **Force Multiplier** - You are putting portable towers with cameras up. You need to do more of this. You need to continue putting more towers that are usable in all weather conditions.
- I see four components to what Border Patrol does:
 1. Boots on the ground
 2. Technology
 3. Air
 4. Marine

Where you are lacking – severely lacking – is marine.

- From Brownsville to Rio Grande City, over 250 miles of river, you have only two access points for boats – one above Anzalduas Dam and one below it. I agree with Border Patrol that the most vulnerable place, if you are an illegal crosser, is when you are in or on the river. That is the easiest place to deter or intercept them.
- **Force Multiplier** - What I am suggesting to you today is a one-time expense. It is not a recurring cost. It is to build more boat ramps and increase the height of the weirs.
- Below Anzalduas Dam, we have eight weirs. Border Patrol needs boat ramps between these weirs.
- Without the ramps and the ability to put boats where Border Patrol needs them, they cannot effectively patrol the river. If illegals see the boats, they won't get in the water.
- Also, we have 19 water districts on the river. They need security. They are supplying 90-percent of the water to 1.5 million people in the Rio Grande Valley. They have no protection because they are all below the wall, except for one.
- Next, when it comes to building more boat ramps, I am told the problem for Border Patrol is the environmental studies and the length of time it takes to do them, which I am told takes years. Water districts do not have these issues. They have channels off of the river, such that the water district pump intakes are not on the river or the embankment, so there is no environmental issue if you put the ramps on the channels.

Give the Border Patrol the money to build the ramps and, as an added benefit, the pumping stations will be more secure.

- **Force Multipliers** – Increase Height of Weirs - We need higher water levels in the river in order for Border Patrol boats to operate. To do that, the eight weirs we have between Brownsville and Mission/McAllen, need to be elevated. That is a one-time cost. In our district, it is going to cost us \$150,000 to elevate our neighboring district's weir approximately two feet. It is a one-time cost that will have a huge impact on the marine component of Border Patrol.
- These suggested solutions will diminish all the other costs you have inland. If you stop the crossers from crossing, you have increased your efficiency and maximized your funding.

What has Texas done right?

- Texas has proven that with more technology and manpower, you can deter illegal crossings. When the National Guard came down, they sat on the river. The troops were parked on the embankment and they did not move. During that time, Mission Police Department will tell you their crime rate dropped by 18 percent and McAllen's dropped nine percent.

Three final things:

- 1. I am not disputing those who say the Valley is safe. What they mean is that the cities are safe. I am talking about those living in rural areas and those living on and by the river. People are moving off their farms and ranches because it is not safe. That is not how it was 60 years ago. We are much worse off today.
- 2. To those who say that more border security of the kind I am describing, including southbound checkpoints, will hurt our economy, I say that if you protect my home, my family and my community first, then the economy will survive and take care of itself. The cartels are like ticks or leaches. They will bleed the animal (the economy) but they will not kill it. It is not in their best interest.
- 3. There are only two things that keep those who live on the river and in the rural areas safe from foreign criminal elements (cartels). One is

not to get in the way of the cartels, and two is not to mess with their business. If you do either of those things, then the cartels will do to you everything they are doing to the citizens on the other side of the river – and everybody who lives on the river and rural areas today knows it.

Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to share this information with you. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Yours sincerely,

Othal Brand, Jr.
McAllen, Texas.