

Opening Statement of Senator Mark Pryor
Chairman, Subcommittee on State, Local, and Private Sector Preparedness
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Hearing: Corruption of U.S. Officials by Drug Cartels
March 11, 2010

Some say we are involved in three wars: Iraq, Afghanistan and the southwest border. Every day we battle Mexican drug cartels that smuggle up to \$25 billion of illegal drugs as well as people into the U.S., and illegal guns and drug money back into Mexico. Much of this goes to and through my state of Arkansas.

The Mexican cartels dominate drug trafficking into the U.S. They are sophisticated, ruthless, and well-funded. They operate widely in Mexico through bribery and corruption, paramilitary force, murder, and intimidation. In 2009 drug violence in Mexico resulted in over 6,500 murders.

The cartels used to operate differently in the U.S., relying mostly on stealth and a U.S. distribution network that the National Drug Intelligence Center says includes operations in an estimated 230 American cities, including three cities in my state. But heightened U.S. border defenses have put a squeeze on cartels. They have tried to regain an advantage by exporting to the U.S. their experience and success in bribing and corrupting government officials who can facilitate their business.

This hearing is about the disturbing scope and nature of the cartel's campaign to infiltrate U.S. law enforcement. We will explore cartel strategies, put numbers to the problem, learn what we are doing to fight it, and what more can be done.

At risk here is more than drug sales. National security is also at risk because border weaknesses can be exploited by terrorists to transport operatives and weapons into the U.S.

While this hearing will review cartel infiltration and influence in Federal as well as state and local governments, our principal focus will be on problems in the Federal government. And within the Federal government we will have a particular interest in Customs and Border Protection, or CBP, which, for reasons we will explore today, appears to have a corruption problem that is orders of magnitude bigger than other agencies.

CBP is our front-line defense at the borders and evidence of growing corruption in its ranks and reports of inadequate employee screening are indeed cause for great concern. Since we are going to shine a harsh light on CBP agents who are double-agents for drug cartels I want to emphasize that there are many thousands of patriotic, honest CBP employees who protect our borders. They deserve and have our thanks and support.

Likewise, the Department of Homeland Security may be in for criticism for not attacking corruption at the CBP more aggressively, but I want to commend CBP for coming forward to discuss the agency's problem so that we can try to resolve it together. This is how the system should work.

Our initial investigation suggests that there are at least three things we should consider to improve our ability to fight this fight.

First, specific to CBP, we need to determine whether reports are true that the agency is not making full use of accepted, legitimate tools for screening job applicants and current employees. Based on the outcome of this hearing I will consider offering legislation on this point. Second, as we know from fighting terrorism, the many agencies involved in the cross-border drug war must work together, share intelligence, and "connect the dots."

If they are not doing this well, we will find ways to encourage them to do better. And third, Congress must ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the fight and that the resources are used wisely.

Our witnesses today are three experienced crime-fighters from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, CBP and the Department of Homeland Security's Inspector General. These gentlemen are leading much of the U.S. government's fight against drug-related corruption.

We welcome them and look forward to their testimony.