

Toole County

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**Statement of Sheriff Donna Matoon
Toole County Sheriff's Office, Shelby Montana
Field Hearing, Havre Montana
"Securing the Northern Border: Views from the Front Lines"**

I would like to thank the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs for the opportunity to speak at this hearing.

Toole County is located in Central Montana with approximately fifty miles of Canadian border front. This encompasses the Port of Sweetgrass, which is located on I-15, a major transportation departure and entrance route between the U.S. and Canada. Due to our unique geographic location, Toole County has a tremendous transit population.

Because of this, our agency has had a long standing relationship with the U.S. Border Patrol, Customs, and Immigration Service who have been more recently combined into the Department of Homeland Security.

When I began in Law Enforcement over twenty five years ago, the U.S. Border Patrol had only seven agents stationed in our county. Many of these old time Border Patrol came to be my close friends and mentors. Many of which I still have contact with today. We would stop into each others office on a daily basis. We communicated while on patrol and watched each others backs like we were a part of the same agency. Often times, the only assistance in the area that could arrive to help you in a timely manner were these federal officers.

The Port of Sweetgrass was a small operation with fewer than twenty employees. Many of these people were lifetime Toole County residents and local law enforcement had close personal relationships with many of them.

Since 9/11 and the federal governments mandate to secure the homeland, we have seen unprecedented growth in the Department of Homeland Security in Toole County. Dozens of new Border Patrol agents have moved into the area and the new U.S./Canadian combined port facility has been constructed at Sweetgrass. The number of federal employees protecting our border in Toole County has increased ten fold. Tremendous amounts of new technology and capabilities such as gamma ray x-ray machines, ground sensors and air patrol have come to our area.

Recently members of the Border Patrol assisted members of our local emergency services and deputies in rescuing a hiker who was having a medical emergency in a remote and rugged area along the border. In large part, due to the actions of these federal employees, this hiker was saved and was transported by helicopter to a medical facility. On any given week, deputies from our agency assist federal authorities in apprehending port runners, border jumpers and locating undocumented foreign nationals. We have participated in the Border Patrols "Operation Stonegarden" where local law enforcement is used as a force multiplier for federal authorities along the border.

With all this said, the changes that have occurred are not without some negative consequences. The introduction of so many new federal employees into our area has forever changed the small town closeness and camaraderie between the federal agencies and local law enforcement. The daily meetings and informal information sharing that comes with close personal relationships have been replaced by quarterly intelligence meetings and senate committees. As new federal employees are constantly rotating in and out of our area, it is sometimes difficult to even put a face to the name you are dealing with. Communications have become a problematic issue where federal authorities now operate on secure digital radio frequencies and car to car or officer to officer communications are not possible. Any communication between agents in the field and local law enforcement requires a telephone call relay to sector headquarters in Havre from our dispatch center in Shelby. This is slow, inaccurate and unwieldy.

In years past, when a sheriff's deputy overheard a border patrol officer check out with a suspicious person in the area, the deputy would make a point to head in that direction to provide back-up and assistance as needed. Border Patrol officers did the same for our deputies. Due to the communications issues, that level of assistance is no longer possible.

Because of difficulties in filling federal positions in this rural and isolated area, our agency finds itself in direct competition with the federal government when the time comes to recruit qualified staff from the local job pool. Recently at a combined charity fund raiser with federal officers, I found myself in the unique position of handing out t-shirts with a large advertisement attempting to recruit Border Patrol officers on the back. This while my own agency was operating at 75% of my patrol capacity.

Please make no mistake, I am not begrudging anyone obtaining federal employment with wage and benefit packages that local governments have no hope of matching, but I do want this committee to be aware of the impact on our agency. Staffing shortfalls in our agency have a direct affect on our community at large. While the federal officers are protecting the border our deputies are protecting their children and family's throughout the county.

As time goes on it is my hope that new personal relationships can be forged, communications will improve and recruitment will not be as competitive in our area. For the last twenty five years I have

worked with the exceptional men and women of the various federal law enforcement agencies that operate in our area. We are glad to have these good people and their families move into our area, enriching our communities and protecting this nation. I look forward to many years of cooperation and interaction with our federal partners.