

Hearing: “Border Security: Measuring the Progress, Addressing the Challenges”

Opening Statement of Dr. Tom A. Coburn, Ranking Member

Thank you to Chairman Carper for beginning what I hope will be a series of thoughtful hearings delving into the complex issues of border security and immigration.

Today, we are going to discuss how we measure border security. It’s an interesting topic, because what we called “border security” in the 1980’s and 1990’s became something very different after September 11th. While the shift in defining border security has changed, the core issue of understanding and deterring the illicit flows of people, drugs and other contraband remains. How DO we measure our success in these areas?

Currently, we have more than 20-thousand Border patrol agents, 1200 Air and Marine officers and upwards of 20-thousand customs officers posted at and between our ports of entry. In addition to boots on the ground, as we call them, there are hundreds of manned and unmanned aircraft, fast boats, mounted agents, water patrols and even military assets all focused on our borders. All this is to say, as a nation we have made a lot of investments and bought a lot of “things” to secure our borders. But is it working and how do we know?

Further, we have to question some of the policy decisions that could impact the debate on border security and immigration reform. I recently sent a letter to the DHS Office of Inspector General questioning the Secretary’s decision to release a number of immigrants being held in detention, ostensibly because of sequestration. It is not clear if there was an analysis to find out whether any were criminals or posed a threat to public safety. I have sent many letters about making smart cuts during sequestration to avoid impacts on essential functions, like national security. Thus, I am confused about why the Secretary would make a decision that could taint the debate on immigration reform.

I have also questioned the Secretary about her approval of the use of drones. In a March 2nd C-NET article, it was reported the DHS has customized its drone fleet to carry out domestic surveillance missions such as “identifying civilians carrying guns and tracking their cell phones,” which fly in the face of civil liberties. We must ask whether the trade off in terms of border security is worth the privacy sacrifice. We have to have good data and a credible measurement of that data to determine how these decisions enhance what we call “border security.”

I look forward to going through these questions with our panel of witnesses today and hopefully get closer to real answer about how we measure border security.