

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

“Border Security: Frontline Perspectives on Progress and Remaining Challenges” April 10, 2013

With the administration releasing its budget today, it is an appropriate time for this committee to be holding a hearing on border security. The federal government – largely DHS – spends tens of billions of taxpayer dollars every year on border security. According to one recent tally, the federal government has spent \$219 billion on border security efforts since 1986.¹

Over the past decade, we have seen a steady increase in resources going to secure the border. For example, in 2004, just over 28,000 DHS personnel were assigned to patrol the land inspect travelers at ports-of-entry at a total cost of \$5.9 billion.² By 2011, that annual cost had nearly doubled to \$11.8 billion and 41,400 personnel.

While there is been some success at reducing illegal immigration, the transnational criminal economy that ships drugs, contraband, humans and cash across U.S. borders is bigger and more organized than ever. The drug trade alone is estimated to bring in nearly \$40 billion in revenue annually for Mexican drug cartels.³

Given our nearly \$17 trillion national debt, Congress must conduct more oversight on border security programs and spending.

I recognize that the agencies working along our border have tough jobs, and that thousands of patriotic ICE and CBP officers are out there on the front lines doing their best to protect our borders every day. I look forward to hearing directly from those on the front lines today.

Specifically, I would like to raise two key issues for the witnesses and the Committee to address today.

¹ Robbins, Ted, “U.S. Grows An Industrial Complex Along the Border,” NPR, 9/12/12, <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/12/160758471/u-s-grows-an-industrial-complex-along-the-border>.

² GAO, “DHS’s Progress and Challenges in Securing US Borders,” GAO-13-414T, March 14, 2013.

³ Keefe, Patrick Radden, “Cocaine Incorporated,” New York Times, 6/15/2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/magazine/how-a-mexican-drug-cartel-makes-its-billions.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed April 8, 2013.

First, how and when will we know if our border is secure? According to GAO's testimony at our committee hearing last month, DHS continues to face challenges assessing the effectiveness of its work to secure the border. And I understand that CBP and DHS continue to work to develop appropriate metrics to measure border security. Secretary Napolitano has openly questioned whether it's even possible to develop such a measurement.

I would like to hear from our witnesses from the front lines tell us what they think are appropriate metrics. And I would like to hear from Border Patrol Chief Fisher when Congress can expect to see CBP's new metric for border security.

Second, I would like our witnesses to address whether we are using our limited resources effectively to secure the border. I remain concerned that DHS has spent billions on technology to secure the border, but much of it has been wasted.

Everyone one in this room knows about the failed SBI-Net program that cost the government nearly a billion dollars before it was canceled. Likewise, CBP has spent nearly \$240 million on a fleet of unmanned drones (and recently indicated it would like to spend \$443 more) despite the DHS Inspector General finding that CBP was all but completely incapable of responsibly operating its drone program.

Securing our borders is one of the federal government's clearest responsibilities—securing our common defense and upholding the rule of law. Yet despite more than \$219 billion spent on border security over the past three decades, we still do not know whether our borders are secure.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how we are going to solve this problem.