

**Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Border Security: Moving Beyond the Virtual Fence
April 20, 2010**

This is the third hearing our Committee has held to review America's border security programs in the wake of the stunning increase in violence caused by Mexican drug cartels.

In fact, it was a year ago today that we held a field hearing in Arizona – with some of the same witnesses who are on our second panel.

I regret to say that in the year that has passed, the situation has continued to deteriorate.

Since 2006, more than 22,700 people have been murdered in Mexico by narco-terrorists in the ongoing war between the cartels and the government. That's a multiple of the number of Americans killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.

The pace of the murders has been steadily escalating - 9,635 murders in 2009 – an increase of 50% from the already unprecedented level in 2008 and three times the 2,837 killed in 2007 – Mexican President Felipe Calderon's first year in office.

These statistics are of grave and great concern to the United States, as they are to Mexico and its strong and courageous President. I greatly admire his unwavering commitment to literally rid his country of the plague of narco-terrorism.

In the past year, the Mexican government has arrested or killed scores of leading cartel figures, including Arturo Beltran-Leyva (Are-too-roh Bell-trann Lay-vah), known as the "boss of bosses," in December.

But as cartel leaders are taken out, the violence seems to increase as the cartels fight amongst themselves for the remaining pieces of the narco-trade.

We must do everything in our power to support our southern neighbors in the historic battle they are currently waging there against the cartels.

And we must continue to be vigilant on the American side of the border because there are deeply troubling signs that the cartels and other smuggling groups are becoming more willing to bring their violence across the border and inflict it on U.S. citizens.

In the past month, three separate incidents have drawn our attention, concern and anger: A pregnant U.S. Consulate employee, her husband and the Mexican husband of another consulate employee were all gunned down in Juarez as they left a children's party; the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo was attacked with an Improvised Explosives Device;

and, of course, a well-known and much beloved rancher in Arizona was murdered on his own property. All this follows the murder of an on-duty Border Patrol Agent last year.

So, the bottom line is that our federal, state and local governments must work together to do everything in our power to control the border between the United States and Mexico.

That brings me to a focus of this hearing – our efforts to use technology to control the border. When the “virtual fence,” or SBInet, was first launched, we were told that it would be extended across our entire southwest border -- nearly 2,000 miles -- by early fiscal year 2009.

Well, it is now April of 2010, almost four years after SBInet began, after \$770 million has been spent directly on SBInet and we are still waiting on the testing of a 23-mile stretch in the Tucson sector.

That’s it!

By any measure, SBInet, has been a failure – a classic example of a program that was grossly oversold and has badly under delivered.

When SBInet first started, U.S. Customs and Border Protection seems to have effectively told Boeing – the contractor – “Go ahead and do what you can do as quickly as you can.”

Without clear goals and expectations, both CBP and Boeing underestimated the complexity of building the system. And the Border Patrol agents themselves – the people who would be implementing and relying on the system everyday – were not consulted on what their actual needs were.

I am also troubled that the program office responsible for SBInet is heavily dependent on contractors, weakening CBP's own organic capability to manage the program and ensure capability.

And, of course, the structure of the SBInet contract -- one overarching contract to a single contractor -- means that CBP does not get the benefit of competition for individual tasks undertaken for the SBInet program.

From the very beginning of SBInet, CBP’s reports to Congress read like a quest to find that mystical point where parallel lines finally meet – it’s always just over the horizon but you never actually get there.

Our committee staff visited the Tucson sector over the recess, and once again, they heard: “We're almost there!”

I, for one, don't think members of this Committee will believe it until we actually get there.

I am pleased that the Secretary has ordered a long overdue internal review of the SBInet program, which will consider its long-term viability, and determine whether there are technological alternatives to providing border control.

I welcome CBP Commissioner Alan Bersin today and look forward to ask more from him about how DHS will approach that review, and how we can better secure our border with Mexico and contain the violence and drug smuggling.

We are also honored to have a second panel of witnesses from Arizona to bring our Committee a first-hand, from the ground, local perspective on this crisis, which is a homeland security crisis.

Senator McCain.