

Good afternoon Chairman Tiffany and Members of the Committee. My name is John Boelts, and I am a farmer from Yuma County, Arizona. I volunteer as the First Vice President of Arizona Farm Bureau. I come before you today to thank you for your attention to our man-made crisis at our southern border. Farmers and ranchers in Arizona and neighboring states are in many ways on the frontlines of this public policy disaster, and I will mention just a few of those ways with my limited time.

Ranchers, their families and employees raising livestock and managing public and private lands in the areas near our border with Mexico face extraordinary challenges with inadequate support from our federal government. The safety of these hardworking people, their families and property is in danger most days and nights due to the lack of law enforcement by federal agencies responsible for border security in these areas. People seeking to enter our country without passing through a legal port of entry are breaking federal law. The damage these people do to the public and private lands while entering unlawfully is unacceptable and the refuse they leave behind is remarkable. Is it too much to ask that the Ranchers of Southern Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas be able to raise their livestock and families without being overrun by illegal immigrants and drug runners?

Where I live and farm in Yuma County, my neighbors and I grow fresh produce such as lettuce, spinach, melons, broccoli and cauliflower in season which spans from August through July. These foods that we grow are mostly eaten raw by people all over the US and Canada. We have nearly 50,000 people working in agriculture in my community of which over 8,000+ workers are H2-A program workers, over 15,000 are commuter workers who travel to the U.S. daily to work and return to Mexico each night and the rest of our workforce is comprised of citizens, naturalized citizens and permanent residents card holders. Our workforce is legal in Yuma County and we have an abundance of legal commerce and activity in my community. That is the backdrop to the mess we have observed since December 2020.

We have individuals and families numbering in the thousands entering our country through areas that are not ports of entry on a daily basis. This humanitarian crisis is happening along county roads in rural areas of my county just like it is the rest of the lands along our southern border. We face unique challenges having food crops that are of the kind that are normally eaten raw growing in open fields. We cannot have trespassers entering those fields, passing through these fields, leaving garbage in those fields or even worse defecating or urinating in those fields. These fresh produce crops are unharvestable due to risks of contamination from human pathogens if they are contaminated in any way, not to mention the extremely difficult humanitarian situations that arise from people living or passing through areas without adequate restroom facilities or shelter. These sort of situations have become far too common these last few years, and pose an enormous liability risk and financial hardship to farmers and fresh produce shippers. Is it too much to ask that the farmers of southern Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas be able to raise their crops and families without being overrun by illegal immigrants and drug runners?

Requiring asylum seekers to seek legal status to immigrate at a Consulate of the US State Department and to have robust enforcement of our laws at the border would restore safety and an environment only conducive to legal commerce in our border regions. We have been facing an extraordinary level of illegal entries into the United States along our southern border these last few years. It was January, 2021 the last time we saw less than 10,000 entries per month on our southern border, and in December of 2023 there were 371,036 encounters dealt with by Customs and Border Protection. The vast majority of these encounters were at the southern border of the United States.

Farmers and farm workers, ranchers and ranch workers and all of our families live and work on these lands along our southern border. If you had over 300,000 people invading your place of work or your community every month you too would feel this crisis. Probably the most interesting group to discuss these matters with are first generation immigrants like those that work for me on my farm and those who live in my community. These people and their families have spent 10s and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars of their own resources to legally immigrate into our country. Sometimes that process took a decade or more and was a financial challenge for multiple generations. These first generation immigrants that I know shake their head in disgust at what they see happening today.

We currently have bad public policy governing legal immigration into our country that does not meet our needs. We lack adequate resources for true border security. We have bad public policy for handling asylum seekers that is creating havoc in our border communities and on public and private property. We have had inadequate legal pathways for most immigrants who would seek a legal path to immigrate into the United States to work in agriculture and many other fields of work. These are not new situations necessarily but our lack of action to simply and definitively resolve these matters is why I refer to these as a man-made crisis. We have the ability to address these issues, but we simply choose not to.

I call on Congress and this administration to act and act swiftly to address the crisis we have at the border. It is time to act and put forth meaningful policies that address the problem and give our border communities and families reprieve. This is not and should not be political and it is time to put partisan politics aside and solve our border crisis.