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Interior Dept. Policies Contribute to Environmental Damage on Public Lands Along the Border

WASHINGTON D.C. – Yesterday, President Obama met with Mexican President Felipe Calderón to discuss a variety of issues including border security and protecting public lands along the U.S.-Mexico border. According to a joint statement:

“The Presidents underscored their commitment to manage the region in a way that enhances security and protects these areas for wildlife preservation, ecosystem restoration, climate change adaptation, wildland fire management, and invasive species control.”

Unfortunately, federal land along the border suffers from significant environmental damage due to [policies](#) of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) that prevent U.S. Border Patrol from effectively securing the border on federal lands.

Although DOI’s stated goal is to protect the environment, the obstruction of the Border Patrol’s enforcement operations is actually resulting in increased environmental harm because criminal trafficking operations are drawn to areas where border enforcement is hampered.

“I appreciate that both Presidents recognize the need to improve the conditions of the land along the border. That begins by allowing the U.S. Border Patrol to apprehend and deter dangerous drug traffickers and human smugglers currently using federal lands to enter the United States. Allowing the Border Patrol access to areas that are currently ‘off-limits’ will bring increased security along our border and will ultimately improve the condition of our protected lands,” **said National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee Ranking Member Rob Bishop (UT-01).**

Foot and Vehicle Traffic



Foot trail through the Coronado National Forest. Source: Natural Resources Committee

- There are thousands of established smuggling trails, many operated by drug cartels, throughout protected federal lands. Heavy foot and vehicle traffic on these trails tramples and destroys public lands.
- A 2007 story in the [Tucson Weekly](#) describes the environmental damage in the Ironwood National Monument, largely due to abandoned vehicles:

“These smuggler vehicles, most stolen from Phoenix, often travel at night without headlights, with tape over the brake lights, and they've been clocked tearing through the monument's dirt roads at 89 mph. This endangers the lives of residents and visitors alike.

It also ensures that many of these load vehicles--such as the tan truck pictured--never make it out of the monument. They smash into trees and saguaros, or run into ditches. The BLM has towed 300 vehicles a year out of the monument since 2000.

These load-outs, as well as the constant foot traffic, destroy habitat and threaten cultural sites and endangered species. The trash left behind requires pickup crews to have biohazard training and armed guards watching them as they work.”

Dumping of Trash



Trash on BLM land in the Roskrige-Recortado Mountains. Source: [Bureau of Land Management](#)

- Protected national parks, forests and Wilderness areas have been turned into personal landfills for illegal border crossers. Clothes, blankets, backpacks, water bottles, trash bags and empty food cans are frequently found discarded on federal land.
- This illegal dumping of trash along the border threatens wildlife, destroys habitat and attracts disease carrying insects. Human waste is also a growing problem that contaminates the drinking water for nearby residents.

Destroying Vegetation



Cactus cut down on federal land to stop visitors. Source: [2002 DOI Threat Assessment](#)

- Criminals are also destroying the vegetation on federal land. For example, cacti are cut down to create road barriers (see photo above) in order to stop park visitors, which can result in robbery and auto theft. The cacti are also destroyed to obtain drinking water. The destruction of these cacti harms the water supply, surrounding vegetation and wildlife.

The best way to protect the environment is to allow Border Patrol to secure the land and stop illegal activity. House Republicans have introduced H.R. ([H.R. 5016](#)), which gives operational control of the border to Border Patrol agents to ensure environmental policies are not restricting them from effectively securing the southern and northern border on public lands.

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