



**Note:** *U.S. Reps. Doc Hastings of Washington, Peter King of New York, Rob Bishop of Utah and Lamar Smith of Texas said their bill, if passed, will address environmental degradation of federal lands and help close national security gaps along the border, which they say has become an uncontrolled highway.*

**[Federal Regs on Environment May Be Hindering Border Security, Lawmakers Say](#)**

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Federal environmental regulations that prevent border agents from expanded patrols of national wildlife parks appear to have had a hand in the government's decision to declare an 80-mile stretch of Arizona-Mexico border a virtual no-man's land.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has closed about 3,500 acres of Arizona border lands -- including parts of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge -- warning Americans that it cannot guarantee their safety in the face of increased violence from drug gangs and illegal immigrants.

That warning comes nearly three months after an Arizona rancher was shot to death near the border. The shooting prompted four Republican lawmakers to introduce legislation banning the Interior Department from using environmental laws to limit border agents from doing their job. The bill, H.R. 5016, has since been referred to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

U.S. Reps. Doc Hastings of Washington, Peter King of New York, Rob Bishop of Utah and Lamar Smith of Texas said their bill, if passed, will address environmental degradation of federal lands and help close national security gaps along the border, which they say has become an uncontrolled highway.

"Effectively securing our borders against illegal entry is a matter of homeland security," King said in a statement. "Border Patrol agents spend every day on the front line, securing our homeland from terrorists. Denying or limiting the Border Patrol access to public lands and allowing the flow of illegals, including potential terrorists, doesn't protect anything."

The lawmakers said internal documents showed that the Interior Department and the U.S. Forest Service have consistently and actively prevented Border Patrol agents from securing U.S. borders by requiring Department of Homeland Security officials to complete lengthy and expensive environmental analyses, and even blocking Border Patrol agents from entering some areas.

"As a result, Border Patrol agents are being forced to wade through bureaucratic red tape just so they can do the job Congress has mandated: gain operational control over the U.S. border," according to a fact sheet released by House of Representatives' Natural Resources Committee Republicans.

Kendra Barkoff, a spokeswoman for the Interior Department, told FoxNews.com in April that Secretary Ken Salazar visited the area in March to meet with land managers and federal, state and local law enforcement, including U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Homeland Security officials.

She said Salazar placed a high priority on working with DHS and other agencies to "meet the twin goals of protecting our national security and our natural resources."

But some federal lands are specifically targeted by criminals, drug traffickers and human smugglers for easy access into the United States from Mexico or Canada, the congressmen say.

The Interior Department, the primary land management agency for 40 percent of the Mexican border and 10 percent of the Canadian border, warned of potential problems in a fiscal year 2002-2003 report, Threat Assessment for Public Lands.

"Virtually all of the lands managed by Department of the Interior (DOI) along the Arizona/Mexico border are sparsely populated with easy access into the United States from Mexico," the report reads. "Terrorist [sic] wishing to smuggle nuclear -- biological -- or chemical (NBC) weapons into the United States from Mexico could use well-established smuggling routes over DOI-managed lands."

Border Patrol agents, park rangers and private citizens have been killed in these federal lands, most recently on March 27, when rancher Robert Krentz was murdered by a person who entered and exited the U.S. illegally via the San Bernardino Wildlife Refuge -- a fact confirmed to the House of Representatives' Natural Resources Committee Republicans by officials from both Customs and Border Protection and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2007, Krentz's wife, Sue, wrote a letter to Congress opposing additional wilderness areas in Arizona she claimed would worsen criminal activity along the border.

"We have experienced \$6.2 million dollars of damages to our ranch and water line because of illegal foot traffic," the letter read. "These areas along the border have long been targeted because of the high amount of private property with[in] the boundaries."

Krentz wrote that ranchers in the area, herself included, were fearful for their lives.

"It is not right that illegal immigrants and drug smugglers should take precedence over honest, hardworking Americans whose recreation and livelihood is damaged," the letter continued. "It is the job of the federal government to protect the defined United States borders from invasion."

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