

I just returned from our southwest border with Mexico. I wanted to see firsthand the progress — or lack of it — in erecting barriers to the drug cartels' smuggling activities and the violence now spilling over into border communities.

Contrary to recent statements from the Department of Homeland Security, the border fence is far from finished and the Border Patrol is still woefully short of manpower.

For this reason, I will soon introduce legislation to complete the border fence.

I looked at a 25-mile segment of the border between Naco and Douglas, Ariz., and the port-of-entry operations at Douglas. This region in southeast Arizona is considered "ground zero" of the border security problem. The Border Patrol catches an average of 900 people each day along the 262 miles of this sector, and more than 40 percent of all Border Patrol apprehensions occurred in this sector from 2005 to 2008.

While 65 percent of those apprehended are Mexican nationals, in 2007, 68,016 came from 150 other countries, including 4,297 from Cuba, 837 from China, and 156 from Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Pakistan. In this Arizona sector in the first six months of this fiscal year, almost 5,000 people have been caught from countries other than Mexico.

The Department of Homeland Security has not been honest in its public statements about the border fence. Beginning in January, DHS spokesmen have claimed that 670 miles of "tactical infrastructure" have been finished on the 1,950-mile border with Mexico. Even Fox News repeats that number regularly. But half of that "tactical infrastructure" consists of vehicle barriers, not fences to stop human trafficking. True border fencing to curtail people traffic can be found on only 375 miles of our border with Mexico — and none of that fencing exists on more than 100 miles of open public lands in Arizona managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

I saw everything from an impressive 15-foot metal fence to a 4-foot system of metal rails meant to stop only vehicles. It's a patchwork system with many gaps; we can and must do better.

When she was still governor of Arizona, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano often criticized the border fence with witticisms like, "Show me a 12-foot fence and I'll show you a 13-foot ladder." Now that the Border Patrol is her direct responsibility, maybe she will begin listening to the men and women who patrol that fence daily. They will tell her that the fence makes a big difference — and that we need more of it.

A border fence is not a panacea, and there are some regions that are not amenable to fencing. But in most areas, a fence is the front-line barrier that is essential to a "defense in depth" strategy. The fence is backed up by Border Patrol agents, ground sensors, and cameras with thermal imaging that can detect movements at night. All three elements work together: the fence, Border Patrol agents, and innovative technology. We need more of all three elements if we are to achieve true border security.

I was stunned by the conflicting missions between the Department of the Interior and Homeland Security when it comes to border security. For example, the Tohono O'odham Reservation is the size of the state of Connecticut, yet the Border Patrol's access to that land is highly restricted. A 2004 Government Accountability Office report identified deep problems in coordinating law-enforcement functions on the public lands along the border, but little progress has been made since then in addressing those issues.

Yes, progress has been made in recent years. The fencing has been improved in some places, and the Border Patrol has doubled its manpower to 18,300 since 2001. But the hard truth is that at the present pace, true border security is still a distant goal. Secretary Napolitano needs to make it her No. 1 one priority, not just one item on a checklist.

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