

Women of the Potrillo Corridor

An open letter to the New Mexico congressional delegation regarding S.1689, The Organ Mountains-Deserts Peaks Wilderness Act. By ranch wives of the Potrillo Mountain Complex. Photos © Lyndsey Duncan.

In 2009, New Mexico Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall introduced wilderness legislation in Dona Ana County. The legislation (proposing 238,650 acres) set off a firestorm of controversy. Most of it has come from the portion of the proposal nearest the Mexican border in the Potrillo Mountains. The 220 members of the coalition for the bill say that the borderlands involved should be protected for all time. The 800 members of a coalition against the legislation believe that the drug-smuggling corridor that will be created will affect not just the community but will pose a national security threat.

The following letter comes from ranch wives who will be affected by the legislation. They represent 48 mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, and granddaughters who have a direct stake in the outcome. Their message is directed to their elected federal representatives who are intent on pushing the legislation through Congress.

The danger on the Mexican border has grown week by week and month by month. The conflict that has been raging across the border and just south of our homes and ranches has finally caught the attention of national news services. We have, for too long, known that the battle is not just a turf war among drug cartels. It is the first Mexican Revolution of the 21st century.

In a response to this growing danger, various governmental agencies have added restrictions to personnel entering lands along this area of the Mexican border. In Arizona, BLM employees in the San Pedro and Las Cienegas National Conservation Areas will not go south of Highway 92 without armed escorts. The USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service will no longer cross the border to inspect cattle entering the United States. Rather, private contractors will load

cattle in sealed containers and bring the animals to government employees to perform their inspections.

In New Mexico, the Las Cruces regional BLM office has introduced a brochure describing the dangers to American citizens on lands they manage along the Mexican border. The Natural Resources and Conservation Service employees in five southern counties will no longer enter what that organization is describing as "the danger corridor" without GPS tracking devices and a fellow employee. Employees of the New Mexico Department of Weights and Measures (DWM) have taken additional steps. They will no longer enter any areas south of Interstate 10 from Las Cruces to the Arizona border without armed escorts.

When reporting these steps taken, their supervisor stated that it was a relief for those



employees “who can now do their jobs without having to look over their shoulders for fear of danger.” In that same meeting, New Mexico’s Luna County Sheriff Raymond Cobos stated that even he would have second thoughts on approaching a group of illegals without backup, even though he was armed.

Months before our ranching colleague Rob Krentz was murdered, his wife Sue wrote letters of warning to her representatives about the danger that this conflict posed to residents living in rural areas along the border. Her warnings went unheeded and Rob was killed.

As wives of ranchers in the Potrillo corridor, we have been silent long enough in the debate about the danger that your wilderness proposal, S.1689, brings to all of us. Every single day, our husbands work on lands that will be affected in one way or another by that legislation.

It was interesting witnessing our ranching community listening to the Weights and Measures’ supervisor and Sheriff Cobos as they were informed about the defensive measures being instituted and followed. We sat there silent and unmoving. Actions to enhance the safety of federal and state



In the vacuum created by the Bingaman and Udall wilderness bill, human and drug smuggling will expand in New Mexico similarly to the chaos that now rules the Arizona border. The ranching community that has existed on these lands for nearly 150 years, long ago became part of the social and physical fabric of the landscape. It gave it color and character and is as much a part of the ecosystem as the land itself. For the community that now awaits the outcome of the legislation, it is a colorless nightmare waiting to happen.

employees are now a very high priority and yet, you, Senators Bingaman and Udall and your staffs, have completely and utterly dismissed our plea about the danger of designating border wilderness on our doorsteps. We stand here without recourse and without protection if your actions are made law. To those who suggest that the bill enhances border security, who is paying you to spread such nonsense? We ask you to name one border wilderness in Arizona that has experienced increased security regardless of how close to the border it is!

The results of 2009 are important. In the El Paso Sector where we live, reduced illegal numbers resulted in apprehensions of 54 illegals per mile of sector border for the year. Over in the Tucson Sector that is now fronted by wilderness and de facto wilderness safe havens like you would create in this legislation, the number was about 920 per border mile or just over 17 times the rate of entry into the El Paso Sector. Such numbers were not always the case. Before the flow of illegals found the safe havens of the wilderness and de facto wilderness-managed federal lands there, the Tucson Sector was deemed a sector where not much happened. That result is now clearly reversed.

Amnesty International claims that 60 percent of females who enter the United States in those smuggling corridors are sexually assaulted. Since 2005, the average number of females in the illegal-alien population has

averaged 17.3 percent. If that is the case, over 100,000 rapes occurred in the Tucson Sector in 2009. If the trophies, panties and other undergarments hung on trees and cacti are symbols of such conquests, the Tucson Sector is a living hell for those women who must pay that price for entry into the United States. As women, we are outraged that our local news outlets refuse to discuss that subject and the proponents of wilderness simply pick and choose their facts.

The legislation designating the Potrillo wilderness will be cheered by the environmental community and by the Juarez and Sinaloa drug cartels. Those of us who actually have duties, responsibilities, and private-property rights within this corridor will face the danger without any real security buffer. We exist in a growing nightmare and you seem to be oblivious to the consequences of a blind environmental agenda.

The Potrillo Mountain corridor wilderness proposal in your legislation is an assault on the lives, the investments, and the dignity of our little community. Just as Sue Krentz warned about the dangers of this border, there will be blood on your hands if you press the environmental madness of the Rewilding Project on our lives and our community. It is not the ranchers who, in the words of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and the Bingaman staff, are angry. It is now their wives!



Four of the original eight authors stand against a backdrop of the Potrillo Mountains. They are (left to right): Penne Elwell, Brenda Allen, Rose Williams and Kathy Wilmeth. These women and the other authors—Carol Cooper, Priscilla Goad, Faye Hyatt and Jo Johns—will gladly meet at any time with New Mexico senators and Congressional District 2 incumbent Harry Teague. The Potrillo Mountain wives can be reached through RANGE magazine editor C.J. Hadley via cj@rangemagazine.com or 775-884-2200.