

# Public Lands Foundation

## Position Statement: 2010-08

### Public Land Being Destroyed by Illegal Immigration

July 18, 2010

#### **Executive Summary**

Smuggling of controlled substances and people into the United States from Mexico has caused significant impacts to lands and resources managed by the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Tribal and State governments and private citizens along the southwest border of the United States. The impacts imperil designated Wilderness Areas, National Conservation Areas, National Monuments and other public lands. These impacts are so severe that immediate action by the Administration and Congress is required, including enactment and enforcement of a new immigration policy and allocation of sufficient resources to mitigate impacts resulting on lands within the National System of Public Lands administered by BLM.

#### **Background**

About 1998, BLM and other public land managers in southern Arizona began to recognize that serious impacts were occurring on the lands they managed as a result of drug smuggling and illegal immigration. Public lands, including protected areas, such as Wilderness Areas, National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, National Parks, Wildlife Refuges and National Forests were faced with a proliferation of illegal roads and trails, abandoned vehicles, trash, human waste and many other impacts.

Damage to these public lands is caused by hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year who avoid using authorized ports of entry on the United States-Mexico border. In fear of being caught, they often avoid public roads and instead cross open desert on foot or bicycles or in motorized vehicles.

Losses of human life are also a major concern. Exposure to extreme desert temperatures, dehydration, vehicle accidents and numerous unknown causes kill hundreds of illegal immigrants each year. These deaths continue even with increased patrols and surveillance, placement of rescue beacons and emergency water stations in strategic locations, increased rescue capability and other life-saving efforts. Some of these deaths have occurred on BLM lands.

Arizona's 374 miles of international border comprise about 19 percent of the total 1,952 miles of southwest United States border with Mexico. And, BLM administers only 44 miles of border in Arizona. However, BLM employees can no longer work in some public land areas near the Arizona-Mexico border due to the risks of encountering drug smugglers and large groups of illegal immigrants. In other areas, BLM employees are

directed to work in pairs, carry satellite phones and take other precautions to reduce risks. This decreases work productivity. Also, visitors are discouraged to visit certain BLM lands, including recreation areas, due to the risks mentioned above.

The first 100 miles north of the Mexico border in Arizona are considered the most impacted by drug smuggling and illegal immigration. This includes more than 3.7 million acres administered by BLM. BLM lands include 15 Congressionally designated Wilderness Areas, one wilderness study area, two National Conservation Areas and two National Monuments. The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, Ironwood Forest National Monument, and Sonoran Desert National Monument are considered to be the most impacted of the BLM lands. These three areas, totaling approximately 683,000 acres, and others, have become dangerous places for BLM to work and the public to visit. Thousands of arrests, thousands of pounds of Marijuana and dozens of vehicles are seized each year on these three areas alone.

In Arizona, literally hundreds of illegal roads and trails have been created across BLM lands by drug smugglers, illegal immigrants and law enforcement officers in pursuit. These roads and trails fragment wildlife habitat, destroy vegetation, compact soils, cause erosion, and in many places create an unsightly maze of roads and trails that confuse visitors. Youth groups and volunteers in Arizona have helped BLM rehabilitate hundreds of illegal roads and trails and numerous ever-widening pullouts. More than 50 additional miles of road have had to be maintained or brought back to a safe condition as a result of heavy illegal traffic. Many more roads and trails require rehabilitation.

Most abandoned vehicles do not run, have blown-out tires or are wrecked. They are left in washes, riparian areas and remote desert. They are difficult and costly to remove.

Soiled baby diapers, empty food containers and water bottles, clothes, human waste and other personal items are just a few of the things left in or near rivers, streams, washes and wildlife and livestock waters. These discards pollute the waters and cause health hazards. The 40 miles of San Pedro River managed by BLM and its tributaries are severely impacted with tons of these items. Trails, rest areas and pick up points also are strewn with heavy concentrations of litter.

Smugglers and illegal immigrants that abandon their cooking and warming fires cause thousands of acres to burn each year, thus creating risks to other immigrants in the area, employees, visitors and fire fighters and the destruction of natural resources. For example, three fires totaling more than 1,500 acres were intentionally set by illegal immigrants in the Sonoran Desert National Monument in 2005. The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, Ironwood Forest National Monument, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area and other BLM lands also have been subjected to such fires.

Each year, youth groups, volunteers and contractors contribute many thousands of hours picking up and disposing of tons of trash left by smugglers and illegal immigrants, rehabilitating the illegal routes and pullouts mentioned above, picking up hundreds of discarded tires, building barriers, replacing wire gates with cattle guards, placing signs and planting trees.

These efforts are focused on the Ironwood Forest National Monument, San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, Sonoran Desert National Monument, and Las

Cienegas National Conservation Area. Resources have not been made available to inventory, clean up or repair much of the remaining portion of 3.7 million acres managed by BLM within 100 miles of the border.

The above is but an Arizona example. Similar impacts on lands and resources managed by BLM in California and New Mexico have occurred, are occurring, and can be expected to occur in future years. Similar impacts also are occurring on National Parks, Wildlife Refuges, National Forests, Military Ranges, Tribal lands, and State and private lands adjacent to or near the U.S./Mexico border.

Although Congress has provided some resources to BLM for cleanup and repair of these impacts, existing capability and resources are severely inadequate to deal with the majority of impacts caused by drug smugglers and illegal immigrants on BLM lands in Arizona.

### **Discussion**

The PLF considers as unacceptable the damage caused on public lands by illegal immigration. The public and BLM should be able to use public lands without fear or intimidation. Something needs to be done to stop the uncontrolled and destructive traffic by large numbers of illegal immigrants who use the desert lands in ways that are not tolerated if done by American citizens. Travel by all parties must be on established roads and trails to minimize impacts on resources. Additionally, littering and other impacts to the fragile desert soils, vegetation, cultural resources and landscapes should not be tolerated.

The PLF finds that the smuggling of controlled substances and people into the United States from Mexico is increasingly causing substantial and oftentimes irreparable damage to natural and cultural resources on Federal, Tribal, State, and private lands along America's southwest border. In addition, these activities are causing the loss of human life and serious risks to public employees, visitors to public lands and local citizens.

PLF appreciates the funding provided to BLM in Arizona by Congress over the past several years to mitigate some of the impacts caused by smuggling of controlled substances and people. More is needed.

### **PLF Position**

To prevent future damage to the public lands:

1. Congress needs to enact and enforce a new immigration policy that will allow immigrants seeking available jobs in the United States to enter legally through established ports of entry and on public highways and roads, instead of entering illegally and indiscriminately crossing fragile public lands on foot and in vehicles.
2. The Department of the Interior needs to take the lead in developing a coordinated interagency plan of action to mitigate the impacts caused by the smuggling from Mexico into the United States of controlled substances and people, along with estimates of the resources needed to fully implement such plan, and
3. BLM needs to be provided the funds necessary to protect and rehabilitate the public

lands in the National System of Public Lands and to fully implement such coordinated plan(s) of action, as may be updated from time to time.

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Updated from No. PLF 29-06, April 21, 2006.