

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
Fencing Along the Southwest Border
Tuesday, April 4, 2017

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome. In January, the president signed an executive order that, among other things, calls on the Department of Homeland Security to “secure the southern border of the United States through the immediate construction of a physical wall on the southern border.”

To fulfill this mandate, the department is seeking various proposals on infrastructure prototypes. These prototypes include both concrete walls and other materials, such as the bollard-style fencing used along parts of the border in California and Arizona today.

The purpose of these additional border barriers is to gain control over the southwest border. As Secretary Kelly testified to the committee in January, “the number one threat to the nation is that we do not have control of our borders. Without control, every other kind of threat—drugs, illegal migrants, counterfeit manufactured goods and pharmaceuticals, diseases, terrorists, and the list goes on—can enter at will, and does.” I look forward to welcoming Secretary Kelly to our committee once again tomorrow to explain the department’s acquisition strategy and budget requests for fiscal years 2017 and 2018.

Before we discuss future strategies and funding, however, it is important that we reflect on the lessons learned from the last major construction project on the border. Today we will hear from two witnesses with extensive experience in these efforts. These witnesses will help us examine the current barriers and infrastructure along the southwest border, including the types of fencing that proved to be the most effective in deterring and disrupting border threats. We will also explore how additional barriers will assist the department in fulfilling its mission. The purpose of the original 650 miles of fencing was to provide “persistent impedance,” an important tool to slow unlawful border crossers down and enable Border Patrol agents to make apprehensions. The purpose of the newly proposed construction project is to fulfill the administration’s commitment to finally gain control over our southwest border. It is important that we carefully evaluate what type of infrastructure is best suited to that objective.

As Secretary Kelly and other witnesses have told this committee, fencing is not a panacea. We need a layered approach to border security, one that includes technology, manpower, a commitment to the rule of law, and the elimination of incentives for illegal immigration. But it should also be obvious, as the Obama administration’s chief of the U.S. Border Patrol testified before the committee, that fencing does work and we need more of it.

The department has the legal authority to construct additional fencing along the southwest border. This committee will continue to work with the department to ensure that we make smart choices that enhance our defenses against the networks that traffic in drugs, in people and, potentially, in those seeking to cause us harm.

I thank our witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to your testimony.