

Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-CA)
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism
Committee on Homeland Security

“Combating Border Violence: The Role of Interagency Coordination in Investigations”

July 16, 2009

Opening Statement, as prepared

Today’s hearing is crucial to securing our borders and further reducing the violence in Mexico that has resulted in over 6,200 drug related deaths. The weapons used in the drug violence in Mexico largely come from the United States, as does the demand for the drugs that pays for those weapons.

This hearing is a timely opportunity to discuss this growing security problem.

On a side note, this is also the first time the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) have testified alongside Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in this subcommittee since I have been chairwoman.

I thank you all for being here. This hearing comes after two major announcements by your respective agencies. Recently, ICE renewed outstanding memorandum of understandings (MOU) with both the ATF and the DEA to better coordinate and investigate gun and drug related cases. These agreements come after much negotiation and work by both the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice.

I want to praise Secretary Napolitano and Attorney General Holder for renegotiating these agreements in the first 6 months that they have led their respective departments. It is important to note some of these MOUs had not been renewed since the late 1970s.

The updated ICE and DEA agreement recognizes the inherent expertise that DHS has in combating large smuggling rings and investigating these rings internationally and domestically.

Further, this agreement will allow ICE to fully participate in DEAs “Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force Fusion Centers”, which have been critical resources in sharing drug related information.

Also, as the largest investigative arm in DHS, ICE has the authority to investigate the unlawful importation and exportation of weapons to and from the United States.

A renewed agreement between ICE and ATF is crucial, given that ATF has responsibility for investigating domestic weapons violations. Further, ATF has the comprehensive E-Trace database which has been an invaluable resource to tracing the purchase of arms trafficked into Mexico to firearm dealerships that are violating domestic law.

Information sharing between the three agencies which are responsible for all investigations of drug and weapons violations at the border is central to our southwest border strategy.

In fact, recent reports from the Government Accountability Office, before the new MOUs had been announced, raised concerns that appropriate communication and coordination between the agencies is not currently in place.

One example that has been widely reported is situation when an ICE agent unknowingly conducted surveillance on ATF agents who were pursuing a suspected trafficker.

There are more cases like this that could have been prevented by appropriate communication and joint operations. I am cautiously optimistic moving forward with these new memorandums of understanding between your respective agencies.

I am hopeful that the agreements will foster more participation in the various taskforces that have been initiated to combat drug and weapons smuggling, such as Project Gunrunner led by ATF, and the Border Enforcement Security Taskforce led by ICE.