



Arizona Cattlemen's Association

MEDIA RELEASE

GAO Validates Claims that Illegal Border Crossers Cause Wild Fires

November 22, 2011, Phoenix, AZ – Today the Government Accountability Office released their final report *“Arizona Border Region: Federal Agencies Could Better Utilize Law Enforcement Resources in Support of Wildland Fire Management Activities.”* The GAO was asked to examine, (1) number, cause, size, and location of wildland fires from 2006 through 2010; (2) economic and environmental effects of human-caused wildland fires burning 10 or more acres; (3) extent to which illegal border crossers were the ignition source of wildland fires on federal lands; and (4) ways in which the presence of illegal border crossers has affected fire suppression activities.

Thirty out of seventy-seven wildfires investigated by federal agencies lead them to believe that illegal border crossings were a suspected cause. “What is more alarming than the actual fires is that firefighters are not only threatened by the fire but also have to take serious precautions to protect themselves from drug smugglers,” says Dan Bell, southern Arizona rancher. The GAO report indicates that firefighters face the same dangers ranchers do every day from drug smugglers crossing the southern border. In fact, fire investigators report that drug smugglers continued business as usual while firefighters worked to contain the 2011 Horseshoe Two Fire.

“Wildfires caused by warming fires or fires used to signal help are common along the border especially when the night temperatures begin to drop,” stated Dan Bell. Federal Investigations found that 15 wildfires were caused by illegals to warm themselves, to cook or to signal for help. Federal agency policy only mandates them to list fires as “human caused.” The lack of direction and fire investigators leaves a majority of wildfires uninvestigated.

Federal agencies are spending more resources in law enforcement in these remote areas to make sure firefighters are kept safe from drug smugglers. A Forest Service official told the GAO that on the first day of the 2009 Hog Fire, firefighters were unable to set up an overnight camp at the scene of the fire because no law enforcement support was available to provide security. According to this official, this allowed the fire, which had burned 200 to 300 acres at the time, to grow to more than 3,000 acres by the next morning. The fire ultimately burned nearly 17,000 acres and cost more than \$700,000 to suppress.

It is clear that other federal agencies understand the threat their employees face along the border and take necessary action to protect their employees. However, this Administration continues to claim that the border is safer than it has ever been while U.S. citizens, including ranchers, face the same threats on their own daily.

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