

On the Green Front by Rogelio A. Maduro

A 'wilderness' for drug pushers?

Some congressmen want a huge "wilderness area" in California, off limits to law enforcement.

In a few weeks, Congress may pass a law that will create an enormous "wilderness" area in southern California. Supposed to protect 8 million acres of land from human intrusion, what the bill would actually do is create a vast corridor and safe haven for drug smugglers and other criminals.

The act, promoted by Bruce Vento (D-Minn.) in the House and Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) in the Senate, prohibits any permanent human presence or motorized vehicles from entering the wilderness. It prohibits law enforcement agents from penetrating the wilderness, either in hot pursuit of criminals or for reconnaissance missions. The prohibition extends to aircraft operations over its entire 8 million acres.

Fortunately, the act has encountered opposition. Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) is leading the fight against it. In a speech on May 17, Hunter warned that Congress is "creating a haven, thoroughfares or smuggling corridors for smugglers." Hunter warned that this wilderness, a large portion of which borders with Mexico, will create a smuggling haven for drug traffickers. He noted that "crime control is a major defect in this particular bill. We have massive smuggling taking place, of both illegal aliens and illicit narcotics, heavy on the cocaine, coming across the Mexican-California border."

Discussing "how creative, flexible and responsive these smugglers are," Hunter noted that "we have built this border fence and put more border patrol on the 14-mile smuggler corri-

dor between Tijuana and San Diego, where about 50% of all the dope and illegal alien smuggling nationwide takes place. Since we have done that, they have started to flank that operation by going out in the California desert. We now have seen the figures, the drug seizures go up from about \$113 million a year, two years ago, to almost \$600 million, four times that, in just one year."

Hunter stated that the wilderness mandate means that "a smuggler, who cuts across the border in a vehicle . . . goes into this refuge that has been created, [and which] will operate for his benefit . . . [and] law enforcement agents cannot follow." It also means that "law enforcement agents, whether they are driving four-wheel drive vehicles or flying aircraft, cannot run reconnaissance over this particular piece of land," he added.

The act is being denounced by top law enforcement officials. Border Patrol officials have written Congress warning of the consequences of creating areas that are off-limits to law enforcement personnel.

In a May 16 letter, Chief Patrol Agent Wayne L. Preston said that the act will create a drug sanctuary and also cost the lives of many illegal aliens. Preston noted, "Recently, the interdiction of large loads of controlled substances has been a common occurrence for Border Patrol agents." Preston stated that "large loads have been seized in the vicinity of checkpoints attempting to bypass those checkpoints on back roads. Many loads have been intercepted coming across the unfenced land border with

Mexico." Preston explained that drug shipments "are flown into remote desert landing strips or air dropped to waiting ground crews in isolated desert areas." In addition, "crude laboratories for the manufacture of synthetic drugs are often situated in secluded areas with limited access."

In addition, Preston said that this is an issue that has "life and death consequences." Many illegal aliens try to enter the United States through the desert and most Border Patrol reconnaissance missions turn out to be rescue missions. He noted that "due to the harsh climate and terrain and the poor level of preparedness of the aliens, every chase is a potential lifesaving effort. Aliens who bail out from cars carry no water with them and walkers frequently underestimate desert temperatures and distances. Over the years, dozens of aliens have perished in the desert and hundreds more have been saved by agents engaged in routine Border Patrol operations."

Hunter has succeeded in adding an amendment to the act which allows law enforcement officials to pursue drug dealers into the wilderness. But this may turn out to be a pyrrhic victory, because the act will drive economic activity and, ultimately, all human beings from this area. The isolation will allow drug smugglers to act with greater impunity.

This bill has been defeated three times in the past 10 years. But this time the support of Boxer and Feinstein enabled it to pass in the Senate. In the past few years the United States has become one of the largest drug-producing countries in the world. These drugs, mostly marijuana, are predominantly grown in National Parks, Forests, and Wilderness areas. Which raises the question: Why are the greenies really adding tens of millions of acres of land to wilderness areas?