

Statement of Ranking Member Henry Cuellar (D-TX) as prepared

Protecting the Maritime Borders – Leveraging Law Enforcement Cooperation to Enhance Security Along America’s Coasts

**Committee on Homeland Security’s Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security
July 11, 2011**

As a Member of Congress representing a district along the southern border, I have long advocated for strengthening our land borders while facilitating legitimate travel and trade with our neighbors.

That being said, many people forget that in Texas, it is a body of water – the Rio Grande – that serves as the border between the U.S. and Mexico. The Rio Grande and lakes along Texas’ border with Mexico are a great natural resource, but also present security challenges for Federal, state, and local law enforcement. People are aware of the recent violent incidents involving suspected drug smugglers on the Mexican side of Falcon Lake, the U.S. portion of which is in my district.

I am a strong supporter of the efforts of U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Coast Guard to better secure these waterways.

Other than “pulse operations” by the Coast Guard, CBP and in particular the Border Patrol, is the only federal agency that currently patrols the area.

Clearly, more needs to be done. That is why I am pleased that the DHS Appropriations bill, recently passed by the House of Representatives, recommends the Coast Guard have an enhanced presence in order to counter border incursion threats in the area.

I had the opportunity to discuss this issue with Coast Guard Commandant Papp at our recent hearing, and I am interested in hearing more from the DHS witnesses before us today about how they can work cooperatively to better secure these areas along the Rio Grande.

I have also worked to support CBP Office of Air and Marine’s efforts to deploy Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs) along our borders, including along the Rio Grande and in the Gulf of Mexico.

I hope to hear from our witnesses today about how this program is proceeding. I am particularly pleased that Sheriff Garcia of Harris County, Texas, was able to join us today. As Sheriff in a major metropolitan area that includes the Houston Ship Channel, a major center for the petrochemical industry, he has a unique perspective on port and maritime security matters. He also understands the challenges posed by budget cuts and reductions in federal grant programs that local communities like his rely on to assist their federal partners in their homeland security efforts.

Given these limited resources, agencies across all levels of government must do everything possible to coordinate operations and avoid duplication of efforts in order to secure our borders effectively and efficiently.

As I stated at our last hearing, ultimately, whether we are talking about narcotics, undocumented aliens, or those who might wish to do us harm, we know that people will take the route they perceive to offer the best opportunity to enter the country. If we secure the land borders, people will try to come across our maritime borders and vice versa, so we must take a comprehensive approach to our Nation’s border security.