

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

Hearing -“A Study in Contrasts: House and Senate Approaches to Border Security”

July 23, 2013

I thank the gentlelady for holding today’s hearing examining the different approaches taken by the House and Senate to border security legislation. I am proud to be an original cosponsor of one of those bills, H.R. 1417, the Border Security Results Act of 2013, sponsored by my colleague from Texas, Chairman Michael McCaul.

It may come as no surprise that my friend and I do not always see eye-to-eye on many of the issues before us in Congress, but as Texans we understand the importance of border security and immigration reform to our communities, state, and nation.

I cosponsored H.R. 1417 in part to help foster constructive, bipartisan dialogue on border security in this Committee and in the full House of Representatives. As reported to the House, the bill requires that the Secretary of Homeland Security submit to Congress and the Government Accountability Office a report that assesses and describes the state of situational awareness and operational control of our borders.

It also requires that not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment, the Secretary of Homeland Security submit to Congress a comprehensive strategy for gaining and maintaining situational awareness and operational control of high-traffic areas of the borders within two years, and operational control along the entire southern border of the United States within five years.

Furthermore, the bill requires that Secretary to submit to Congress an implementation plan for each of the DHS border security components to carry out such strategy, and for GAO to review those plans and report to Congress on their findings. If the Secretary determines operational control has been achieved in accordance with the Act, the Secretary is to certify as such to Congress.

I was pleased with the bipartisan work on H.R. 1417 in Committee, where several thoughtful amendments by Members from both sides were adopted, thereby strengthening the bill. In particular, I was glad amendments offered by my colleagues from the border region were adopted to address impacts on border communities and economies. I also appreciated the bipartisan support for my amendment to address the smuggling of people, drugs, and weapons.

More remains to be done, however. For example, we must acknowledge that achieving operational control of the borders will require new border security resources. Those resources must be provided in any final border security legislation. I look forward to working with my colleagues in that effort.

Also, H.R. 1417 addresses just a portion of the challenges facing our nation with respect to our broken immigration system. A comprehensive bill or package of bills will be necessary to address the full scope of challenges.

That is why I commend Senate for acting on true comprehensive immigration reform legislation that not only provides for border security and immigration enforcement, but also offers a path to citizenship for the approximately 11 million undocumented persons in this country.

I believe we have an obligation to bring these people out of the shadows and – for those who are willing to work hard, pay taxes, and abide by our laws – welcome them as full members of our American society.

While I commend the Senate for its comprehensive approach, I do have some serious reservations regarding the border security provisions included in S. 744 during floor consideration. I have long been a strong proponent of providing our border security personnel the tools they need to do their jobs.

However, I am concerned that S. 744 provides approximately \$46.3 BILLION for border enforcement-related activities without adequate assurances that these resources are necessary or appropriate for the task at hand.

For example, where is the study we need another 20,000 Border Patrol agents? Or was that just a politically attractive, round number? Additional agents may be necessary, but I would like to see the assessment that sets forth a need for almost 20,000 more.

Also, is it wise to put in statute specific amounts of particular border security technologies to deploy to each Border Patrol sector, when the security challenges along the southern border are continually evolving?

Whereas Arizona had been the border hotspot in recent years, the border area near the Rio Grande Valley of Texas is now unfortunately suffering from rising illicit activity. We must not tie the hands of the Border Patrol when it comes to deploying resources wherever they may need them.

Finally, does it make sense to replace existing tactical infrastructure along the border with new pedestrian fencing, at a cost of millions of dollars? Or would we be better off using those scarce border security dollars in a more thoughtful way?

In short, there are pros and cons to the approach taken by the House and Senate on border security, and we can learn from both.

We must take the best of both approaches and shape them into a comprehensive border security and immigration reform package that can pass both houses of Congress. My Subcommittee Chair has said in previous hearings that we have a moment in time to do something on immigration reform, and I agree.

That time is now. I strongly urge the Republican Leadership to bring such legislation before the full House. I hope we can make an earnest effort to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation in the 113th Congress. It is in the best interest of not just the 11 million undocumented, but all Americans that we do just that.