

Opening Statement of Rep. Brian Higgins

Hearing: “Transparency, Trust and Verification: Measuring Effectiveness and Situational Awareness along the Border”

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

March 1, 2016

Like my colleagues from Arizona and Texas, I also represent a border district, though mine is located on our Nation’s border with Canada. New York’s 26th Congressional District consists of portions of Erie and Niagara Counties, including the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, and sits adjacent to America’s maritime border with Canada along the Niagara River and the eastern shores of Lake Erie.

Buffalo is home to the Peace Bridge, the busiest passenger crossing on the northern border and a crucial link between the economies of Western New York and Southern Ontario and our two great Nations. Niagara Falls is home to two more international crossings, the Rainbow Bridge and the Whirlpool Bridge, which are also critical to travel and tourism in the region.

Cross-border travel and the efficient flow of goods and people across the border are vital to the communities I am privileged to represent. We are fortunate to have a strong partner in border security and facilitation matters in our northern neighbor, Canada. Like most Americans, I have a keen interest in ensuring all of our Nation’s borders are secure, including, of course, the southern border. But I will focus my comments today on our northern border, since our border with Canada is often somewhat forgotten in these discussions.

The nature of the threat on the northern border – primarily terrorists or their instruments entering the U.S. across the vast, open spaces of our 5,000 mile shared border with Canada – is certainly very different from the southern border, where the volume of undocumented crossers from Mexico dwarfs the number that enter from Canada each year.

Still, there are far fewer Federal resources dedicated to securing the northern border, which could be cause for concern. Only a fraction of the total number of Border Patrol agents, air assets, and cameras are deployed on the northern border, meaning situational awareness on the northern border is not what it should be.

Similarly, U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s Office of Field Operations continues to be understaffed at ports of entry based on the agency’s own staffing model, which slows legitimate crossers and makes it more difficult for officials to spot the handful who may pose a concern.

The fact that our shared border with Canada includes the Great Lakes and other waterways regularly enjoyed by thousands of legitimate boaters only adds to the challenge of achieving situational awareness in the region. I hope to hear from our CBP witnesses today about how we can improve situational awareness along our northern border, perhaps in conjunction with our Canadian partners.

With respect to measuring border security, many of the metrics used on the southern border – such as the number of individuals apprehended or pounds of drugs seized – are just not as appropriate for the northern border. I hope to hear from our Government Accountability Office witness today about what their work indicates about the state of border security, and especially what metrics might be most appropriate for the northern border. Finally, I look forward to hearing from the entire panel today about how the Department of Homeland Security, with support from Congress, can continue to better secure all of our Nation’s borders.