

The \$46 Billion Immigration Question

The money in the Senate bill slated for border security is a classic example of congressional overkill. But it's not all wasted cash.

By: Fawn Johnson- July 13, 2013

The “border surge” provisions in a recently passed Senate immigration bill are shocking, in a bad way—and a little awesome, in a good way. That’s by design.

They are Republican vote bait, yes, and they reek of tough-guy talking points. Sens. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., and John Hoeven, R-N.D., crafted an amendment that tried to respond to conservative cries for stronger border security. It greased the skids for the massive immigration bill to glide through the Senate on a smooth, bipartisan 68-32 vote. Like it or not, it will be a major part of any negotiations with the House.

The amendment is so over-the-top that it has become an object of ridicule and outrage in both liberal and conservative camps. It would cost \$38 billion, on top of the \$8 billion for border security already in the bill. Depending on whom you ask, it’s a \$46 billion boondoggle, backslide, or blunder.

Here is the joke. The amendment would double the current 20,000-agent U.S. Border Patrol. In practical terms, that would strain the Homeland Security Department’s Border Patrol training academy and recruitment efforts. Many of the border agents we already have spend a lot of time staring at sand. Adding more would do nothing to stop those individuals who come on tourist visas and don’t leave. Those who do attempt a border traverse already know how to look out for guards.

Here is where it becomes serious. The amendment offers a laundry list of technological goodies to be divvied up among the nine Southwest border sectors—including five new Blackhawk helicopters, 4,595 unattended underground sensors, and six VADER radar systems (manufactured by defense contractor Northrop Grumman). The must-have gadgets in the legislative text read like DHS’s wish list for Santa Claus, made real. But they focus, appropriately, on the high-tech smuggling operation being waged on the other side of the border. They cost about one-tenth of the \$30 billion needed for the Border Patrol increase.

“The technology and infrastructure is important,” said National Immigration Forum Executive Director Ali Noorani. “Frankly, I’d rather have a smart deployment of technology than an imaginative deployment of people.”

Infrared sensors don't discriminate. People, even trained agents, do. A serious buildup of surveillance technology forces the border crossings toward policeable areas and gives agents the tools to monitor organized smuggling rings. Mechanical stakeouts also offer the least threatening way to curb illegal entries without unduly intruding on the people who live along the border.

Now, back to the late-night monologue: The amendment would mandate 700 miles of border fence, a \$5 billion to \$7 billion prop akin to dummy police cars on commuter routes. Massive fences are offensive to border residents and pointless for all but the casual illegal crosser. But, immigration-reform advocates figure, if fencing makes the border hawks happy, so be it.

"People are going to think we're crazy," predicted Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., before the amendment was revealed.

Indeed they do. "It's terrible; terrible. It's coming close to making this bill not worth it, making it so the costs outweigh the benefits," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute.

The gambit isn't working very well with conservative advocates for enforcement, especially ones who live close to the problem. "We should make believe? No, I don't believe in that," said Rep. Steve Pearce, a Republican whose district spans New Mexico's border with Mexico. "Under [George W.] Bush, we went from 10 [thousand] to 20 [thousand], and it had zero effect."

Border crossings in recent years have been at their lowest levels since the 1970s, largely because of the exponential increases in border enforcement over the past 10 years. But border agents have a limited mission. They are responsible for only the swath of land a few miles in from the border. They walk or drive along the edge looking for new footprints or broken twigs. If unattended ground sensors alert them to activity in the desert, they'll drive out to the spot in jeeps to apprehend whoever they find. Sometimes it's just animals.

Border Patrol agents don't help screen people and goods at the legal points of entry. They can't enter private homes that the illegal crossing guides (aka "coyotes") use as "stash houses." The agents can't travel 70 miles up the interstate where the illegal entrants are heading.

Meanwhile, the coyotes drop off a group of smuggled newcomers near a checkpoint 15 or 20 miles from the border. The group walks around the checkpoint to be picked up on the other side. Once those people are in the interior, probably in other stash houses, they can easily avoid detection.

Dotting the border with more guards isn't going to solve those problems. "That's a way to spend gazillions of dollars of taxpayer money for a Band-Aid," said Robert Howard, a consultant for the South Texans' Property Rights Association. "It doesn't stop the cartels. It will enhance their business."

"There's very little for interior enforcement," said Stewart Verdery, a former DHS official under Bush who now is a partner at the Monument Policy Group. Without immigration agents who can look for trafficking rings farther inside the country and ferret out unlawful entrants at work

sites, a heavily policed border ribbon will continue to entice people to try to cross it. Once they do, they are more or less home free.

The sexiest talking point of the border surge is its price tag. The “shock and awe” impact of \$46 billion has the added benefit of accurately reflecting what it would take to reduce illegal immigration to a trickle. It’s a dare to policymakers to put up or shut up. It is intended, deliberately, to look like a sledgehammer crushing an ant. On that front, Corker and Hoeven’s amendment is a hit. Just don’t look too closely.

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