

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Ensuring Homeland Security While Facilitating Legitimate Travel: The Challenge at America’s Ports of Entry”

January 3, 2008 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee field hearing in El Paso, TX entitled “Ensuring Homeland Security While Facilitating Legitimate Travel: The Challenge at America’s Ports of Entry”

“Before we begin, I would like to pause in remembrance of El Paso County Sheriff Leo Samaniego, who passed away on December 28, as most of you know. Sheriff Samaniego was a respected member of the law enforcement community. He was a law enforcement officer for over 50 years, including serving more than 20 years as El Paso County Sheriff. Sheriff Samaniego also testified on border issues before this Committee in Washington, D.C. two years ago. I know my colleagues join me in extending our sincere condolences to Sheriff Samaniego’s family, friends, and associates.

With respect to today’s field hearing, I would like to thank my friend and colleague, Rep. Silvestre Reyes, for urging the Committee to hold the hearing and for his leadership on border security issues in Congress. He knows the importance of this issue to El Paso and the border region firsthand, and is an excellent advocate in Congress on your behalf.

Today, we will hear testimony from government witnesses about the challenges they face in keeping our nation secure, while also facilitating legitimate travel and trade through our ports of entry. We will also hear testimony from local stakeholders who are directly affected by increasing wait times at bridges here in this growing border community. I look forward to the discussion, because it is increasingly apparent that there is a growing problem at America’s ports of entry.

Last year, America witnessed the well-publicized Andrew Speaker incident. A patient with a very serious strain of tuberculosis was able to re-enter the U.S. through a northern border port of entry, though he should have been detained. We know that the Speaker incident was not an isolated one.

In addition, a recent Government Accountability Office report revealed that thousands of unauthorized individuals entered the United States through ports of entry in a single year. At the same time, the lines to enter the U.S. continue to get longer, which El Pasoans and residents living along both our nation’s land borders know all too well.

It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of Customs and Border Protection officers and other personnel at our ports of entry are dedicated individuals working under extraordinarily difficult conditions for relatively low pay.

We need more of these personnel, and they need additional training to do their jobs

more efficiently. We also need to expand and improve aging infrastructure at our ports of entry, and build new ports to accommodate growing demand.

Unfortunately, we cannot fully address all of these issues overnight. It is my hope, however, that today's hearing will help us continue to work together to better secure our nation's ports of entry, and improve the lives of those who call border communities home."

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