



Testimony of

Mr. JR Ramirez

On behalf of the

Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association

Submitted to the

United States House of Representatives

Committee on Homeland Security

**Joint Subcommittee Hearing – Subcommittee on Border
Security and Enforcement & Subcommittee on Counterterrorism**

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**The Real Cost of an Open Border: How Americans are Paying
the Price**

Held on

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Introduction

Chairman Higgins, Ranking Member Correa, Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and Members of the Subcommittees; on behalf of cattle raisers in the Southwest, thank you for inviting me to provide an update on the state of the border.

My name is JR Ramirez. I live in La Pryor, Texas, where I manage two commercial cow-calf operations, each with extensive wildlife management programs. My family has been ranching in Zapata County since 1932 on Circle 17 Ranch, and I am part of the fifth generation involved in the operation.

I am testifying today on behalf of Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. TSCRA was founded in 1877 and is one of the largest and oldest livestock associations in our nation. We represent 26,000 cattle raisers who believe in the future of the beef industry and seek to see it thrive.

But that reality has become more difficult with the growing challenges along our Southern border.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection has [tracked more encounters](#) in 2023 than this time last year, putting our border on track to exceed the more than 2,300,000 encounters from the 2022 fiscal year.

Illegal immigration and a lack of border security have changed ranching as we know it. In South Texas, our business, operation, security and way of life are threatened daily.

Damaged fences and gates, high speed chases, break-ins, stolen vehicles and trespassing are daily occurrences. Ranchers like me on the front lines are bearing financial burdens that are threatening our ability to operate profitable businesses that raise food for our country and to protect essential habitats and wild spaces.

The cost of infrastructure

In the last twelve months, our ranch has had 30 documented cases of fences or gates being breached by a vehicle. The least damaging of those cases cost our operation \$1,000 while other incidents have surpassed \$10,000 in damages.

Costs extend beyond the repairs. A cut fence or open gate allows cattle to escape into other pastures or neighboring ranches. When that happens, additional hours of work are put in by our entire team to gather livestock, often requiring a helicopter to rectify the situation, a direct out-of-pocket cost to our ranch.

The breaches of fences and gates involving vehicles are expensive, time consuming and pose a huge danger to our workers and families on the ranch, but they are also added to by an equally difficult challenge – cut fence lines. Many times, these breaches to our operation are less obvious.

Trespassers will cut fences in a manner that does not draw attention, creating areas where cattle and wildlife can move freely outside of the ranch undetected for extended periods of time.

For example, on a six-strand barbed wire fence, trespassers have cut the middle four strands, leaving the top and bottom strands intact so the damage is not obvious. On a net wire fence, trespassers cut a rectangle large enough for adults to move through freely. These property damages are near impossible to keep up with given the hundreds of miles of perimeter and cross fencing that must be monitored. It is simply not feasible to check the status of fence daily, despite our efforts to be diligent.

As a result of both drive throughs and cut fences, a series of financial burdens external to the infrastructure is realized. If cattle are mixed within our operation or escape to a neighboring ranch, we may not be able to market cattle at the appropriate time or ensure cattle breeding occurs at the right time. Our herd health can be at risk if neighboring cattle introduce disease that would otherwise not exist on our ranch.

The cost of conservation

These instances also limit our ability to manage our land. When livestock are let outside of the pasture they were to graze, grasses may not have adequate rest, damaging plant populations and rangeland health. My stocking rates suffer, limiting the head of cattle I can run and directly impacting potential profits.

Responsible and well-managed hunting leases are another way ranchers offset the formidable costs of ranching while also contributing to wildlife conservation within the state. However, both efforts are lost because of trespassing. High-dollar wildlife escape ranches when fences and gates are compromised. When those sources of revenue are taken away, the chances of a profitable year greatly diminish. Hunters look to other areas of the state – or another state entirely – when purchasing hunts. The danger along the border is so great, hunters or even landowners themselves, may deem the risk on a property too high.

The volume of foot traffic alone is staggering. The ranch I manage is about 20 miles from north to south. Every crossroad in between going from east to west has fresh tracks daily. Plastic bottles, jugs, cans, backpacks, clothing, shoes, coats and trash litter our property. I cannot clearly describe the amount of trash that now covers South Texas ranches. These materials will take hundreds of years to decompose.

We try to clean up what we can see off the roads, but there are millions of acres not accessible and, therefore, will never be cleaned up. The litter left behind poses a risk to livestock, as well. It has led to cattle loss, as some items can be consumed and cause digestive failure in cattle. The ultimate result of this litter and pollution is harm to animals and the long-term defacement of

beautiful South Texas rangelands that will never be the same. Ranchers shoulder the burden of this financial loss.

The cost of safety

Passing through a remote ranch like ours in the Southwest is dangerous. South Texas is known for its extreme temperatures. This month temperatures surpassed triple digits each week, and there is no real shelter in the middle of brush land. Migrants can quickly find themselves dehydrated, seeking water from livestock troughs and tanks, which often makes them sick. In these cases, securing the border quickly becomes a matter of life or death.

Unfortunately, we have found ten deceased migrants in the last two years on our ranch. It is painful to think of the bodies across these remote landscapes that will never be found or of the individuals that are, at this very moment, struggling to find clean water or shelter who only have days, if not hours, to live.

We have been asked today to discuss the cost of impacts along our border. How do we put a cost to their lives or the lives of my family or my employees?

Finding employees is becoming more difficult as well because most cowboys do not want to live where their safety is at risk. Many employees who live on the ranch have their homes broken into frequently and never know when they may unexpectedly face a trespasser on their land and whether that trespasser is friendly or dangerous.

I share the same concern. If I come across unexpected guests on a ranch, it's my instinct to help. However, I must weigh my personal safety, too. I do not know who these people are. I do not know what their intentions are. I do not know if I can stop to offer them water without endangering myself. I do not know if they will break into my home.

My family and I cannot leave anything outside. We must hide our vehicle keys. We must look over our shoulders every minute while we are outside in our backyard or out in the pasture. I fear for my family's safety when they are home alone.

I have two daughters aged eight and ten. They are growing up on a beautiful South Texas ranch where they should be able to walk down to the tank about one hundred yards from our house to fish whenever they want. They can't. They should be able to run around our yard freely. They can't. They should be able to walk or ride their bikes to the barn to feed their horses. They can't.

My experience is unfortunately not unique. TSCRA conducted a border security survey of our members last year. The results show that the threats and challenges I face are the same ones faced by hundreds of my fellow ranchers across the state.

As cattle raisers, we are doing our part to feed the world and raise the next generation of ranchers to take our place. We consistently deal with droughts, inclement weather, increased input costs and ever-fluctuating cattle prices. Those factors alone make ranching a costly endeavor and

challenging livelihood. When you add in the costs resulting from the current state of our border, it is almost impossible to make a profit.

We cannot allow the situation to continue as it has. We must do better for our ranchers, our families and all the citizens that are living through this crisis along the border.