

Remarks by Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge at a Joint Press Conference with Secretary of the Interior Santiago Creel

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(Remarks as Prepared)

First, we'd like to thank Secretary Creel and our friends in Mexico for their warm hospitality during our visit. You are gracious hosts. And thank you for your vigorous commitment to cooperation as we face mutual challenges.

We have an opportunity to shape our countries' futures – to mold a vision of peace, prosperity, security and freedom – a continuation of our shared democratic values. The Bi-national Commission meetings that we have participated in these past two days provide us with an opportunity to tackle our common challenges and give shape to our vision. And one of our most urgent common challenges involves protecting our citizens.

The Border Security and Cooperation Working Group is a good start. In just its second year in existence, it has solidified our commitment to border security and safety. The renewed bi-national agreement, signed last February, focuses on nine key areas of security, including prevention and public safety.

We are proud to have reaffirmed our commitment to safety and other key points in the 22-point Border Action Plan. And since the last Bi-national Commission, we have made much progress in securing our two nations:

- We created a Cyber-Security Working Group.
- We established a new Strategy Document to guide the Bi-national Infrastructure Protection Working Group.
- We successfully implemented the US-Mexico Agriculture/Food Critical Infrastructure website to exchange information more efficiently.
- Our US-VISIT working group's coordinated efforts now allow border-crossing cardholders to enjoy expanded time limits – from 72 hours to 30 days. This promotes commerce along the border and ensures safety and convenience of border commuters.
- We reviewed the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) program and plan to expand new lanes along the border in major traffic areas this coming year.
- And our Free and Secure Trade program has been implemented at the seven largest ports on the border. These seven ports account for 92 percent of the commercial traffic on the US-Mexican border.

Clearly we are moving ahead, and these achievements signify solid progress.

The United States and Mexico are both dedicated to improving the safe, legal and efficient flow of goods and people across our shared border.

We are actively engaged and working together to improve, among other things, screening standards and information-sharing, while always keeping efficiency in mind. We will use all tools available to us to reduce wait times for both people and goods crossing the border.

In 2005, we will open the eighth Rail Vehicle and Cargo Inspection System. This will give our Customs and Border Protection the ability to screen 100 percent of the rail traffic arriving into the United States from Mexico. And we will protect the lives and human rights of Mexican nationals attempting to cross the border. The public safety messages of the Border Safety Initiative, and the Border Patrol's Search and Rescue Team, directly help reduce loss of life.

Programs such as the joint US-Mexico Voluntary Interior Repatriation program have helped reduce exposure-related deaths in the Tucson sector by almost 70 percent. And US-Mexican cooperation has disrupted human smuggling rings by identifying and prosecuting offenders on both sides of the border.

The United States and Mexico are united in our efforts to dismantle terrorist and criminal networks by sharing information and working closely and effectively together. And that's important: For the collective work of free people, pledged to liberty, is the greatest weapon we have in the fight against terror. Let us continue to use it – wisely and well.

On behalf of the American people, my thanks to President Fox, Secretary Creel and the good citizens of Mexico for a partnership and friendship that is bound to security, freedom and hope for all those who call our two countries home.

Thank you.

THANK YOU.