

Local News

Parks committee to meet in Carlsbad

By From staff and wire reports
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CARLSBAD — An oversight field hearing with the House Subcommittee on National Parks concerning National Park Service involvement in border security is scheduled to take place today in Carlsbad.

The meeting will begin at 1 p.m. at the Pecos River Village Conference Center. It is open to the public.

Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., will preside at the meeting, according to a press release from the House Committee on Resources.

The subcommittee will examine how to balance national security with protection of park resources, the release states.

Park Service and Border Patrol officials plan to talk about their efforts during the hearing.

“Protecting these cathedrals of nature ... remains one of the chief national security challenges our nation confronts,” Pearce said.

Congress has given the Park Service about \$120 million to beef up security since the 2001 terrorist attacks. But parks have spent more than \$21 million more on security — money that otherwise might have been used for maintenance and other needs, according to the House Resources Committee.

Parks have hired more rangers and built barriers to prevent people from crossing into the U.S. through federal land.

Some in Congress are worried about how the agency is balancing this new responsibility with its mission of preserving land and hosting millions of vacationers.

Pearce is particularly concerned that adding to the Park Service’s duties will force parks to cut back in other areas, which might cause some visitors to stop coming.

“Let’s catch it before it becomes a problem,” he said.

The issue is particularly acute in border parks, where people crossing from

Mexico have created hundreds of miles of illegal roads and trails, left piles of trash and threatened rare wildlife, Interior Department officials say.

The problem started in the late 1990s after the Border Patrol began cracking down on illegal immigration in cities. Border crossings shifted to rural areas, including 365 miles of land on the U.S.-Mexico border managed by the Park Service.

An estimated 250,000 people crossed illegally through Park Service land in 2001 alone.

The problem came to a head in 2002 after a ranger at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona was shot and killed by a suspected drug trafficker fleeing Mexican police.

Shortly afterward, the park increased the number of rangers from five to 16 and began building a vehicle barrier, said Larry Parkinson, interior department deputy assistant secretary for law enforcement and security.

While the efforts have helped, Parkinson said: "It's still bad."

But he downplayed the effect increasing security has had on the Park Service's budget.

"Everybody has had to rethink and redeploy resources," he said. "If you ask anybody if they have as much money as they would like, they would say, 'No, we want more.'"

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