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Leading Conservation and Human Rights Groups Oppose U.S. Border Patrol's Push for Unlimited Access to Protected Public Lands.

Groups Call on Border Patrol to Abandon Plans for Unlimited Motorized Access to National Wildlife Refuges, Wilderness Areas

TUCSON, Ariz., Sept. 16 /PRNewswire/ — Sixteen national and regional groups joined forces to oppose the U.S. Border Patrol's push for unprecedented levels of access to federally protected public lands, including Wilderness areas, National Wildlife Refuges and National Monuments. In a letter to Mr. Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the group states that the U.S. Border Patrol has made requests that will alter millions of acres of federally protected land without notifying the public about it and without the environmental analyses that are required under law.

"The Border Patrol's blanket requests for unlimited motorized access to protected parks, monuments, and wilderness areas are being made behind closed doors without any opportunity for public involvement," stated Jamie Rappaport Clark, Executive Vice President for Defenders of Wildlife. "While we recognize the critical importance of the Border Patrol's mission and are committed to cooperating with this agency, this secretive push for unfettered access is a recipe for future conflict."

"Our nation's public lands are a valued resource for all world citizens. It is the United States' responsibility to preserve the integrity of these lands," said Sonja Macys, Executive Director of Tucson Audubon Society. "Many of our border parks and protected areas provide migratory corridors for birds and other wildlife — animals that don't respect geopolitical boundaries. If we are to maintain the integrity and diversity of these lands, we must work together to find a meaningful solution to the situation along the border."

The presence of hundreds of Border Patrol agents, their use of off-road vehicles and helicopters, and extensive construction of camps, prisons, and other infrastructure has played a major role in the extent of environmental damage to public lands. Vast and formerly pristine areas within Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument are now saturated with new roads, trampled soils and vegetation, and abandoned vehicles and human belongings.

"These border enforcement policies, designed to seal urban crossing areas, force migrants into the harsh terrain of the desert, and succeed only in shifting migration patterns," said Jose Matus, Director of Coalicion de Derechos Humanos/Alianza Indigena Sin Fronteras. "From October 1, 2003 to August 3, 2004, more than 175 migrants have died in Arizona alone. These proposed measures will only continue the existing human rights and environmental crisis."

"The unfortunate truth is that the magnificent, ecologically critical, and economically important borderlands of Arizona — and the many imperiled species which depend upon them — are

potentially being damaged beyond repair,” the group stated in its letter. “While we respect the complex and dangerous mission with which the Border Patrol is entrusted, we vigorously oppose the current push for unrestricted motorized access within National Monuments, Forests, Wildlife Refuges and Wilderness areas.”

A copy of the letter can be found at <http://www.defenders.org/newsroom/border.html>

Native Plant Society; Arizona Wilderness Coalition; Border Action Network; Center for Biological Diversity; Coalicion de Derechos Humanos-Alianza Indigena Sin Fronteras; Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection; Endangered Species Coalition; Latin American Foundation for Environmental Protection, Inc.; Latino Health and Community Service; Sierra Club, Grand Canyon Chapter; Sierra Club; Sky Island Alliance; Tucson Audubon Society; The Wildlands Project