

One Man's Border Battle

An interview with businessman-rancher Roger Barnett as he copes with waves of illegals

by Robert Park and Rick Oltman

Roger Barnett of Cochise County, Arizona, has been in the national news. He has a towing operation along with a propane business in Sierra Vista, and a ranch about 65 miles away, northeast of Douglas. The 22,000-acre ranch of both deeded and state property is two miles from the Mexican border on the west side and five miles from the border on the east side. The Social Contract asked Prescott, Arizona resident Robert Park of ProEnglish, accompanied by Rick Oltman of The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), to interview Mr. Barnett about the influx of illegals crossing his property and the general problems along the Mexican border.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT: Roger Barnett, there has been an awful lot of press lately about problems here in Cochise County, Arizona with regard to the influx — or the invasion, so to speak — of illegal aliens coming across the Mexican border. Is your ranch impacted by that at all?

ROGER BARNETT: Tremendously. They come through daily, hourly sometimes. I think over a twenty-four hour period, someplace, somewhere on my place a person would be able to find an alien on it, whether there is one or whether there is a hundred.

TSC: Has the volume of alien traffic through your property caused any particular damage to it?

RB: Yes, there is damage all the time. When they come through, they are trampling down the grasses that are scarce in this area. They leave their trash behind. They are knocking fences down. When they come up on the water mains, they won't drink out of the trough, they think they will not get fresh water, so they puncture holes in the water mains. It is tremendous. There is damage to everything.

TSC: Have you tried to get any relief from this?

RB: Yes, I have complained and notified and talked about it to the local police, the state police and the federal authorities. It just seems like it goes in one ear and out the other.

TSC: How long do you think this has been going on to where you feel it has really adversely been affecting your operation?

RB: It has been going on for the last two-and-a-half to up to three years.

TSC: What do you have on your ranch? What kind of ranch operation is it?

RB: It is a beef cattle-raising business. I breed the mother cows, produce the young ones and sell them off every year.

TSC: You mentioned that you have made a lot of complaints to the various levels of authority, the Cochise County sheriff's office in particular. What kind of a response do you get from the sheriff's office?

RB: The sheriff he seems... I don't know, at least he sympathizes with us. But then he claims his hands are tied. He listens too much, I think, to the county attorney. The county attorney tells him that he has no jurisdiction or authority to do anything about it. So, therefore, he just backs off, I believe. Why I say that is because the other day there was a deputy sheriff patrolling — a border patrol officer off duty — who saw several cars load up. He called the sheriff's office for assistance, and that deputy comes back with the comment, "I'm not going to get involved with that, it's not my job." Then the border patrol says they were speeding down the road at 85 miles per hour. And finally that border patrolman had to convince him to go out there and assist and stop the guy from breaking the law.

TSC: What about the state authorities, the department of public safety?

RB: It seems like they are doing, I think, some good. They stop every car they can. They take the car away

because it is an unlicensed driver with no insurance, no registration. From what I can determine they are doing a better job than the sheriff's officers.

TSC: So what you're saying is, if the department of public safety finds reason to make a stop on a vehicle that turns out to be operated by an unlicensed illegal alien, who maybe has illegal aliens in the vehicle with him, they at least take the vehicle off the road, whether or not they are actually able to handle the illegals themselves as far as the custody situation. Is this what you're saying?

RB: Yes. I can't think of any time lately where the border patrol has not responded and have not taken them.

TSC: These cars that are being used to smuggle illegals, once they are stopped, they are, of course, impounded so that they can't go back so the illegals can use them again. Is that right?

RB: They impound everything, but yes, they can use them again if the correct owner comes and can show that he is the owner of the car. He's got to come in there to the towing business and show proof of ownership with a legitimate ID card.

TSC: Well, I've heard stories that repeatedly the same owner will come in to claim the same car that has been stopped repeatedly by the border patrol for smuggling. Do they do any follow-up to get this car out of the hands of this owner who is obviously subsidizing this smuggling activity?

RB: They try to track the titles and everything; they go and do that. They are putting cases together where they can go out there and they are talking about seizing their houses, seizing all their cars or whatever assets they have under the asset or forfeiture law or RICO.

TSC: Haven't there been repeated cases where rental cars are used to smuggle? Do the rental agencies get away scott free, or do they have to be responsible?

RB: No. Just the other day someone came down to pick

up a car for a rental agency. He told us the reason that they rent to them is that they make a \$4,000 deposit if it looks like it is going to be an alien smuggling deal. If they turn it back in, they get the deposit back. If they don't turn it back in, if they're towed or picked up or whatever, and Sabens has to come down to reclaim it themselves, there is \$4,000 forfeited.

TSC: In your towing business here in Sierra Vista, I take it that you are frequently called by many of the law enforcement agencies including the border patrol to come and pick up vehicles that they have stopped and removed the illegal aliens from it, and you take it to your place of business. Is that correct, you tow it?

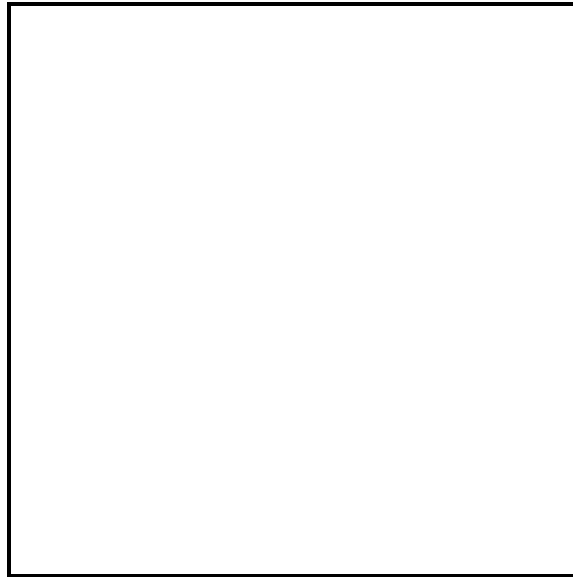
RB: Yes, I do. In fact, I think every towing service in town does that. I think they are all on the list.

TSC: Roger, I've heard that one of the practices is that the coyotes, the smugglers of illegal aliens, will give these vehicles to a driver who then takes them up to Tucson or to

the Phoenix area, for instance, where the aliens are deposited, and then are moved on elsewhere around the country, and the coyotes then send other vehicles or a truck or a towing service up to those places in Tucson and Phoenix to pick up those automobiles and bring them back. Are you familiar with anything like that?

RB: Yes. In fact, yesterday, you remember, when we were on the road there were two semi-trucks and trailers — car carriers. The first truck had wrecked cars on it. I don't know what that was all about. But the second one had cars that they had picked up in the Tucson or Phoenix area, and they were bringing them back for a load for another trip.

TSC: I also read an article fairly recently that pointed out that a 1999 Ford Explorer had been stopped by the New Mexico State Police that was hauling illegal aliens. I believe they were going to Houston, and when the highway patrol ran a license check on the vehicle, they



Roger Barnett

found out it had been stolen from a car lot in Mesa, Arizona, and that they also learned that there had been twenty other vehicles stolen from that same lot in recent weeks. Do you run into any situations like that?

RB: Yes, in fact the number you got is wrong. I had one, it was a '98 Chevy Tahoe. Just prior to my obtaining title, two law enforcement agents came in. I think they were with the department of public safety. They determined that it had been stolen from this car agency out of Mesa or the Phoenix area. This recovery for them was number 50 or 60. I think they had close to 80 they were missing out of this car lot.

TSC: Roger, you said that this has been going on in such a way that you have personally been affected by it for two-and-a-half years. I know there has been a lot of national publicity and there have been foreign correspondents here to visit with you. What happens when there is a lot of media attention focused on this such as television crews coming in and airing the program? Is there anything that happens as a result of those interviews and all that publicity from a standpoint of further government activity? Is there more border patrol activity with regard to trying to stem the tide?

RB: Oh yes. What they do is, if they find out a news agency is going to be here, they seem to put an extra bunch of agents in the area where they think the news agency might go. And they try to keep the aliens from coming through so the news agency can't see the numbers. They said they've got it probably 80 percent contained. But I don't think so. I think maybe they have it 20 percent contained and the news agencies felt they were being lied to.

TSC: You're saying that the reporters didn't believe the border patrol telling them that they had contained illegals in a certain area?

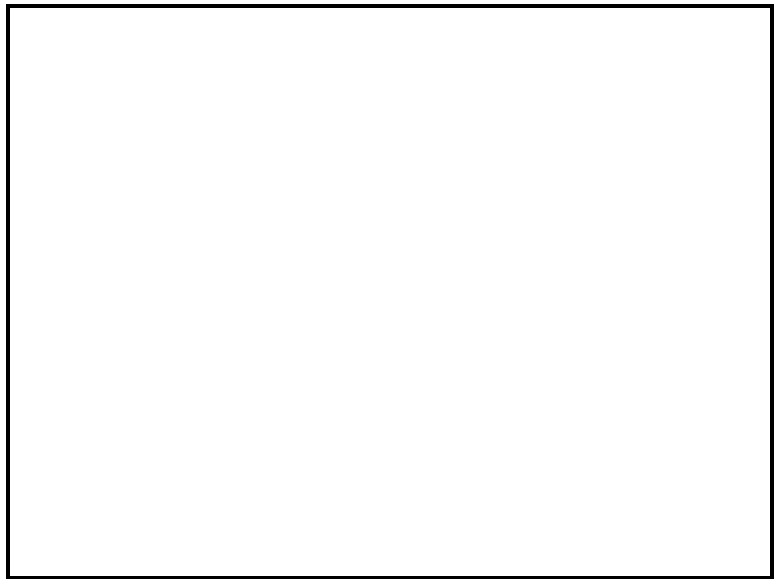
RB: That's right, yes.

TSC: Based on what they had seen?

RB: I don't think by what they had seen, but from what different people have told them.

TSC: This situation in Cochise County has evolved since you first got started in this, and it seem that the press had quite a lot to do with that. You started out by having the border patrol come out and pick up these illegal aliens on

your property. You suffered name-calling in the press. They called you a vigilante and worse. You were actually threatened by the U.S. Attorney with indictment for violating civil rights and threatened by the Mexican government. And then it just seems like last year when the news coverage reached a peak, that things changed in Cochise County and the government all of a sudden decided they wanted you for a friend. They stopped calling you names, they started complimenting you for rescuing people out in the hot desert, and promised a lot more agents to come in. Isn't it true that the number of



Robert Park helps Roger Barnett erect a billboard in Cochise County.

agents has doubled in Cochise County in the last year or more?

RB: Oh yes, it has doubled in the last year or better. What is amazing is they should be picking up more illegals. They are up to close to 500 agents now, I believe, and they are still only picking up a thousand a day. So I think there is something wrong with the numbers.

TSC: But they certainly seem to be able to put on a maximum effort whenever there is a celebrity that's being followed by a news crew. They seem to be able to do the job at that point.

RB: That's right.

TSC: What is your personal relationship with these border patrol agents? When you meet up with them on

your ranch, what kind of response do you get?

RB: The ones that are deployed from different areas? The other day there were two from San Diego in an unmarked patrol car, and we were glancing out there to see what the horses were looking at. They stopped and wanted to know who we were, and we told them. They had heard about me, and they seemed like they were real receptive to me. They said now we can go back and say, "Hey, we met Roger Barnett." Some of these agents are receptive of what we do. Other ones just don't like it at all.

TSC: Even if some are ambivalent about catching illegal immigrants, they all seem interested in the help you and Don can give them in finding the drug traffickers. They check information with you and they ask you "have you seen this in the past," because they are interested in stopping the drugs.

RB: Yes. Some are that way, I mean it's just a very few, but those are the ones that are usually working on the drugs.

TSC: Ron Sanders, the recently retired chief border patrol agent who was in charge of this sector estimates there is going to be 250,000 pounds of drugs coming through Cochise County this year. Hasn't Cochise County been designated a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA)?

RB: I would think so, yes, because it's so easy to get through with the enforcement they have on it.

TSC: If the sheriff's department is ambivalent about policing the illegal aliens, what's their response in terms of drugs? Do they give you any idea they will try to use this HIDTA money that they've got from the federal government to track down these drug traffickers?

RB: Not that I know of. It seems that after they got that drug money, that's when their response to the illegal activity went down. I mean he [the sheriff] got his money now so what does he need to do, at least that's my opinion on it.

TSC: Roger, from my own observations, I find that illegal aliens and drug smuggling and trafficking go pretty much hand-in-hand. What has been your experience in that regard?

RB: That's what the border patrol says, but I couldn't prove it one way or another. I wouldn't base it with me,

because people coming across, if they are charging anywhere from \$600 to \$1,000 per person in that group; they've got anywhere from 26 up to 32, 35, 40, whatever they bring across. That's easy to figure. That's anywhere from \$24,000 to \$40,000 for smuggling people, and it's not as dangerous. If you get caught on that, they usually turn you loose, unless you get caught maybe six

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or eight times. And that way you get prosecuted, and your time in jail would be a lot less too, as opposed to smuggling drugs.

TSC: So that's the cost now to get from, say, Agua Prieta on the Mexican line to Tucson, approximately \$1,000 per person?

RB: Yes, I think \$1,000, that's part of the trip, but again too, I think that lands you in either Las Vegas, Los Angeles, or maybe Salt Lake City. I think on going to Atlanta or New York or Chicago, I imagine that would be more. Some people say that it costs about \$600 to \$800 to get to Phoenix. So there's been different numbers thrown out, but I can't confirm that.

TSC: You recently had a truck in your yard that you had towed to the border patrol that had, what was it, 70 or 80 illegal aliens?

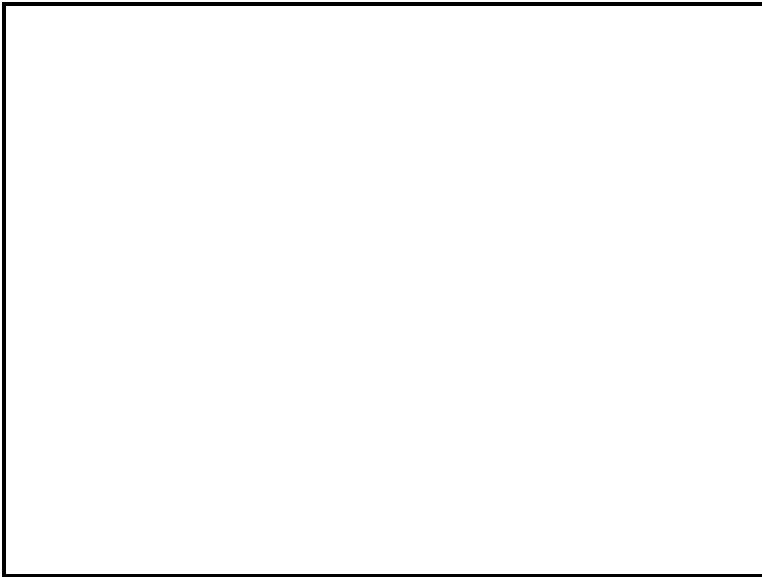
RB: It was 74.

TSC: In the back of this truck? This is important for people to understand the scope of bringing in all these people. This is a multi-billion dollar business. This one truck with say 70 illegal aliens in it. One load, and that load is about a two-hour drive to Tucson. One load is worth \$70,000 for that particular smuggler.

RB: That's correct. The truck was worth probably \$10,000 and they never picked it up. It's still sitting there.

It is a 1990-91 International, fairly new one, big box truck. The border patrol had trouble stopping it. The smuggler ran off the road up on an embankment and it tilted. Everybody in the back fell down and were trying to catch each other. And that guy got away, just ran away.

TSC: It seems that some of the things that we have heard, you can't really quantify, but there are certain things the smugglers are being openly helped with. For instance, the cell phone service in Agua Prieta. The Mexican telephone company down there have jacked their gain up so high that local telephones won't work. And the feeling is that this helps smugglers who are coming across into this country so that they can get their



messages and make their connections.

RB: Oh yes, that's the way it is. I see quite a few cell phones in different cars, two-way radios, cheap ones. You can buy them in these catalogs, Cabela's or others. You can talk up to three to five miles away.

TSC: On Labor Day, a newspaper reported that you picked up 16 illegal aliens and notified the border patrol. They said that these people had been waiting in Agua Prieta for fifteen days before they came across. Is that any indication to you that there is so much of a demand and so much of a need for more coyotes to smuggle them across for these people that they have to wait two weeks for their turn in line to come across?

RB: It sure looks that way. I never thought of it that way, but then that's more than likely the problem. Or maybe that they are just waiting until they get enough money. Instead of collecting money afterwards, maybe they are going to collect money before. Because just like that article in the paper this morning, they're stealing each other's money and loads. So if they are paid before they cross that line, there will be less of a threat of getting kidnaped away from the other guy. And also that load of sixteen people: I found out this morning that two of them were OTMs (other than Mexicans). They were Colombians, I think. Also, too, I found out this morning that at Naco Station yesterday they picked up 140 to 160 OTMs, a lot from Cuba, trying to process them and trying to figure out what they are going to do with them.

TSC: Roger, with everything that has interfered with your life down here, with the heavy influx of illegal aliens coming across your property, and one thing or another, what is your attitude toward the illegal entrants?

RB: You look at them and see what their government has done to them. You can't hardly blame them, but again too, they need to stay home and lobby or fight, or whatever they need to do to get their government to make their life better down there. They sure are not going to make it better up here with all the hardships they have to face. But again too, I blame our government as well as the Mexican government for not taking care of the problems. Our government is bowing down to big business. Big business wants our government to let them keep coming through. So that's why they are doing it. The Mexican government, they want them to still come through. They come up here so they can send big bucks back home. The biggest culprits in the whole thing are the American government and the Mexican government.

TSC: You don't feel that the American government is taking care of their citizens or protecting them.

RB: No, they are taking care of big business more than they are taking care of their citizens. Because that's where the big money is. They are getting paid off. The citizens turn a blind eye just like the Mexican government is turning a blind eye to their citizens.

TSC: Well, how does business in America benefit from

illegal aliens?

RB: From cheap labor, they don't have to pay higher labor costs, etc. They make bigger profits. Stockholders like that.

TSC: We've already mentioned the damage. The property owners around here are pretty upset with what is happening to their property. It seems the authorities are ignoring your property rights. What is your comment about that?

RB: They don't care. They feel I'm just one person. The next person down the road is just one person. They don't stop and think that there are thousands of people in this country that are affected. But they can't see that far ahead, I don't think. They feel our government has let us down.

TSC: There is also a considerable amount of actual crime, criminal activity associated with the influx of illegal aliens in Cochise County. Is that a correct observation?

RB: Yes it is. Even though they say there is less crime in Cochise County now than there has been in the last several years, I think there is so much vandalism, so much stealing going on with the aliens. I think a lot of people, are like me — whenever I get some damage done on my place, I never call it in. Things are not getting reported, not getting counted. It is something we've learned to live with. We should be calling it in, but there are a lot of people who don't do it. Nothing gets done about it.

TSC: Did you used to report this kind of vandalism and you quit doing it because you weren't getting a response?

RB: Yes, because all they do is take the report, and nothing gets done about it. They wouldn't go out there and do any enforcement or anything. We're on our own out here. If you called them, sometimes they would respond right away, and other times it takes up to two to three hours for them to respond.

TSC: Based on what you see and your knowledge of the illegal traffic and drug trafficking coming through Cochise County, do you think if local law enforcement — both the city, the towns in Cochise County, the county, the state,

and the federal government working together — do you think together they could put up enough of a deterrent to stop this massive invasion through Cochise County?

RB: Maybe. I think they should all work together, but I've never seen them work together on anything other than illegal aliens. On crime and other stuff there is no communication. They don't know how to do it.

TSC: Roger, you clearly have political representation here from this part of Arizona. Have you gotten any satisfaction from your elected federal representatives, such as the two United States Senators, or the U.S. Congressmen from this area?

RB: They say they are doing things about it. They have never contacted me personally. I think they just kind of white wash it. That's the only thing I can think of. They've got funds down

here. They've got funds for the county. What they need to do is get the military down here, or the national guard to seal it up.

TSC: You mean with all the news attention that you have personally gotten in the last year or so, that neither your senator or congressman have bothered to contact you and ask you about your problem and get your point of view on it?

RB: No they haven't. No. Senator Kyl's office called and said he was going to come in on a Friday, and I was to meet him at the airport. He only had a few minutes. He wanted to talk to me and some other people. At the last minute, he canceled it. They said that there was a schedule conflict. That's what the deal was, they always had scheduling conflicts. I felt like I was a hot potato, or maybe a crazy nut or something like that.

TSC: Were you aware of your senators or congressmen contacting anybody else in Cochise County who was having the same experience you are along the border?

RB: I don't think so. If they had, it hasn't been published or whatever. When Doris Meissner came here about a year ago, she only contacted a select few to meet with her, and I wasn't one of the few. I was put on the back burner. They just don't want to talk.

The October 2000 issue of *The American Spectator* features "Alien Crossings" by Glynn Custred, an anthropologist at California State University, Hayward which opens with this observation: "Ask ranchers along America's border with Mexico what's been going on and they'll say: 'Invasion.'"

TSC: Roger, you and I and Rick recently visited a number of ranchers and business people here in Cochise County and offered to put up some signs on their property, which kind of expressed the sentiment and feelings of the people in this area. What kind of reception did we get?

RB: I think we got a real good reception. I mean they wanted the signs — they wanted to give us permission and were real receptive, I thought. They were almost joyous that we were there with them.

TSC: One rancher, Ms. Ruth Cowan, got very excited, and when we told her that we were going to put some signs up, what happened?

RB: She got out there and she was going to put it up herself and we said, no, we would. So she insisted on putting them up. She wants more.

TSC: She got on her cell phone and was calling neighboring ranchers to find where we could put signs on their property. What was the one that she particularly wanted more of?

RB: Yes, she wants the “high intensity drug trafficking area.” She wants that sign.

TSC: That’s the sign that at one time you had on your ranch. It says, “Notice, entering high intensity drug trafficking area.” Is that correct?

RB: Yes that’s correct. It stayed up for one week to ten days, and it got stolen. It’s on someone’s wall in their house now, I believe.

TSC: Do you have any signs along that line on your property now?

RB: Yes, I sure do.

TSC: For the Americans who read this story and are concerned about this problem, what would be your recommendation; what’s your message to them?

RB: They need to wake up and notify as many people as they can. Let them know that if they want this country like it was years ago, they better start doing something about it.

TSC: I also heard you say to people that live in New York, and Michigan, and states distant from Arizona that they’re just crossing your property, but they are going to live in your community.

RB: That’s right. They’re not living in my backyard, they are just running through my backyard to live in other

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people’s backyards. They won’t stick around close to the border because if they get picked up its too easy to be deported. This is not a fun thing for me, this deal. It is a taxing situation. It is so overwhelming, the trash they leave behind. We try to pick up what we can now, and it is just overwhelming. We pick it up one day, and the next day it’s back

again. The government needs to get with it, and they need to show the people, the citizens, that they are serious about this. If they ever get it stopped, I could get to enjoying life again. It uses up my weekend time, holidays, everything. The government is not taking care of my property rights. The city, the county, the state, and the federal government, none of them are. They have no respect for their citizens.

TSC: Roger, I think there was something in the newspaper recently that said you had an encounter with a group of 14 or 15 illegal aliens out on your property. Can you tell us what that was about?

RB: Yes. In fact, there were 42 or 43. We were watching them going around the perimeter of the fences in one of the pastures, and there were some two- or three-day old tracks. We started following them just to see where they led, and that gave us an idea of the next time — of where they might go — some intelligence or whatever. All of a sudden we came across some fresh tracks, and then I heard a racket and there was a bunch of aliens running. When I caught up with them they started running toward me. They begged me for water and told me they had been out there for a week, and they wanted to know who I was. I told them I was a rancher. They wanted to know where my cows were, and I said why? Because they were hungry, and wanted to eat one. I told them instead of doing that they should have chased rabbits, so they could get food from the rabbit, if they were quick enough to catch it. But I feel if one of my

cows were out there, they would have attempted to kill it to eat it. I believe they were desperate because of their thirst. They weren't getting water from any well or anything, they were getting it from stagnant ponds. The water wasn't clear, it was reddish colored. That's what they were drinking. I had six gallons of water with me and they drank that water in just a little bit of time. I had about a dozen cookies with me, and they said they were awful hungry.

TSC: Is this an unusual situation where they actually would have killed one of your livestock?

RB: No, they haven't killed them before, at least I haven't found where they have killed them. I know some ranchers that have lost livestock. They just killed a calf and cut a quarter of it off, cooked the quarter and left the rest to spoil.

TSC: Thank you Roger. •

Proposed Platform of the Green Party

Re: Immigration Policy Reform

We support the traditional right of the Chicanos to move freely across the U.S./Mexico border, a right that long pre-existed the U.S. takeover of jurisdiction in the Southwest.

The U.S./Mexico border should be recognized as a zone of bi-national interdependence where people are free to move for work, shopping and recreation. Most immigrants come to the U.S. in response to cyclical demands in the labor market.

Since labor demand drives the migration, most immigrants — legal or not — do not displace native workers. Keeping workers illegal just makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and illegal actions by employers. This makes them an attractive labor source which, in turn, increases their demand. This cycle of oppression and exploitation is the equivalent of a modern-day slave trade.

Seasonal labor demands country-wide should be allowed to be filled by foreign workers using work visas, with these workers subject to U.S. wage, tax and labor laws.

The Employer Sanctions provision of 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act should be repealed as ineffective. Bi-national unions and hiring halls should replace the illegal and exploitative activities of labor contractors.