

Arizona Daily Star®

www.dailystar.com® www.azstarnet.com®

Published: 08.19.2007

O'odham leader vows no border fence

Says U.S. needs to repay tribe for migrant costs

By Brady McCombs

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Waist-high steel vehicle barriers may someday line the 75 miles of international border on the Tohono O'odham Nation, and high-tech towers could one day dot the horizon — but don't expect a fence or wall.

At least not while newly elected tribal Chairman Ned Norris Jr. is in office.

"The Nation will always be against something like that," said Norris during an interview Thursday about border issues. "And yet we hear rumors that that is the direction the government is moving.

"But have they consulted with us on this permanent 15- to 20-foot iron fence? No. Do they think they are just going to come out here and do that? Not over my dead body, they are not going to do that," he said.

The Tohono O'odham Nation has allowed the Department of Homeland Security to open two law-enforcement facilities to process illegal entrants and to begin construction of vehicle barriers. It has also agreed in principle to the future construction of high-tech monitoring towers, Norris said.

But, he said, federal officials need to show more respect for the Nation and involve its leaders in more decisions.

"The Nation is very accommodating to the efforts to try and secure the border," Norris said. "But you can't do that without coming to the people and asking, 'This is what we would like to do, and these are our thoughts.' "

"Unfortunately, sometimes the mentality or the attitude is you're a federal reserve, and we are the federal government, and we're going to do whatever we need to do," Norris said. "We are saying: You can't operate that way. We are not going to allow that to happen here."

The Tohono O'odham Nation didn't used to worry much about illegal immigration, from a time when about 225 illegal entrants crossed a day into the United States.

That all changed in the mid-1990s.

Government officials launched enforcement efforts in San Diego and El Paso that funneled human- and drug-smuggling into Arizona. The O'odham's porous border and wide open lands have since become ground zero for the mass migration.

newest tribal chairman for tohono o'odham

Ned Norris, Jr., 52, started his four-year term as chairman on June 11. He has worked for the Nation for 30 years, and was vice-chair to ex-chairwoman Vivian Juan-Saunders from 2003-06 before resigning and becoming marketing director at Desert Diamond Casino, a position he held until he was elected chair in late May.

DID YOU KNOW ...

The U.S.-Mexico border split Tohono O'odham ancestral lands due to a historical oversight, tribal leaders say.

The Gila River — which runs just south of today's Phoenix area — was the boundary between Mexico and the United States in 1848, when Mexico ceded the land north of it. The river remained the international boundary until Congress ratified the Gadsden Purchase, in which the United States bought what are now the southern portions of Arizona and New Mexico in 1854.

Politicians did not take the Tohono O'odham into consideration when they drew the international lines in 1853, dividing the tribe's traditional lands, Tohono leaders

With an estimated 1,500 people crossing every day, illegal immigration has become a major concern for the Nation. Dealing with the problems brought on by human- and drug-smugglers is one of the key issues facing Norris.

During the interview at his office in Sells, the tribal capital southwest of Tucson, Norris addressed many of these issues:

On who should shoulder the responsibility for illegal immigration:

"The problem of illegal immigration is a problem of the United States of America. It's not the Tohono O'odham Nation's problem...."

On how the increased flow has harmed the Nation:

"We've got several concerns: environmental problems, problems that are negatively impacting our sacred areas on the Nation; problems of our people feeling secure and safe on being able to go out into the desert. ... So, people are being less compassionate about the migrant, and people are having to protect themselves and their family, and that's concerning."

On whether there are any related benefits to the Nation:

"No, not at all. ... There have been no reimbursements to the Nation for any of its financial contributions. Yeah, the Nation has secured some Homeland Security money. Yes, the Bureau of Indian Affairs law enforcement has been able to secure an additional, I think, \$1 million. But that's \$1 million compared to \$3 million a year, easy, for the last eight years. ... That's not considered reimbursement on our end."

On maintaining compassion for the individuals crossing despite the problems created by the mass migration:

"We can't forget who we are as a caring people. We can't lose sight that many of the migrant situations, many of our O'odham are in similar situations. ... There are Third World conditions in Mexico and other countries, but there are Third World conditions that exist within the United States of America, and many of those are on Indian nations. There are Third World conditions that exist here on the Nation itself."

On the effect of having hundreds of U.S. Border Patrol agents roaming the Nation:

"I don't want to sound like I'm badgering the Border Patrol or bad-mouthing the Border Patrol, but you always have some bad apples in your basket. In too many cases, we have some agents who are disrespectful of the land, disrespectful of the people, are not culturally sensitive to the environment, to who we are as O'odham.

"You have situations where the Border Patrol is in pursuit of illegal human- or drug-trafficking, and they make their own roads because those vehicles that are trying to get away from the law aren't going to stay on roads. So, you've got grazing-pasture fencing that is being torn down or cut down so they can pursue that, and you don't have anybody replacing that."

On the Nation's often-strained relationship with the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Border Patrol:

"I heard one of the council members say, 'You know, we complain when the Border Patrol isn't there, and we complain when they are there.' And that's

say.

O'odham live on both sides of the border and want to be able to cross freely to see family or to receive tribal services such as health care.

Source: Star archives

By the numbers

2007, year to date on Tohono O'odham Nation

60

Number of bodies of illegal border crossers recovered.

64

Number of bodies found in all of 2006.

32,000

Pounds of marijuana seized by Tohono O'odham police, on pace with 2006.

391

Stolen vehicles recovered by Tohono O'odham police.

699

Abandoned vehicles found that had been used to smuggle drugs or people.

6

Miles of border vehicle barriers erected so far; 4 on the west end of the Nation near San Miguel Gate and 2 on the east end near Menager Dam.

\$3 million

Annual cost to the Nation of dealing with border-related issues such as paying for autopsies, investigating the deaths and responding to crimes such as break-ins, robberies and vehicle theft committed by illegal entrants and their guides.

really what the situation is like. We want to be at the table with them. We want to be able to participate in the decisions that are being made that are going to impact us as a people, impact our land, impact anything that's going to happen as a Nation. And I can't tell you that we are always there. ...

"It's much more cooperative at the local level. ... They are here; they are more readily available to us. We talk to them on a regular basis. They see our situation; they hear our complaints. The level of availability and level of cooperation is much more workable here."

\$2.5 million to \$3 million

Cost to Indian Health Service to provide care to illegal entrants who succumb to exposure.

Source: Tohono O'odham Nation, Border Patrol.

On the many deaths of illegal border crossers:

"We don't want people dying on our lands and if they are, they've gotten be taken care of. We've got to provide the health care somewhere, and that's fine if they provide it at the Indian Health Service — but give them some reimbursements so that way we are not at a total loss financially with the next O'odham that needs to be treated in the hospital."

newest tribal chairman for tohono o'odham

Ned Norris, Jr., 52, started his four-year term as chairman on June 11. He has worked for the Nation for 30 years, and was vice-chair to ex-chairwoman Vivian Juan-Saunders from 2003-06 before resigning and becoming marketing director at Desert Diamond Casino, a position he held until he was elected chair in late May.

DID YOU KNOW ...

The U.S.-Mexico border split Tohono O'odham ancestral lands due to a historical oversight, tribal leaders say.

The Gila River — which runs just south of today's Phoenix area — was the boundary between Mexico and the United States in 1848, when Mexico ceded the land north of it. The river remained the international boundary until Congress ratified the Gadsden Purchase, in which the United States bought what are now the southern portions of Arizona and New Mexico in 1854.

Politicians did not take the Tohono O'odham into consideration when they drew the international lines in 1853, dividing the tribe's traditional lands, Tohono leaders say.

O'odham live on both sides of the border and want to be able to cross freely to see family or to receive tribal services such as health care.

Source: Star archives

By the numbers

2007, year to date on Tohono O'odham Nation

60

Number of bodies of illegal border crossers recovered.

64

Number of bodies found in all of 2006.

32,000

Pounds of marijuana seized by Tohono O'odham police, on pace with 2006.

391

Stolen vehicles recovered by Tohono O'odham police.

699

Abandoned vehicles found that had been used to smuggle drugs or people.

6

Miles of border vehicle barriers erected so far; 4 on the west end of the Nation near San Miguel Gate and 2 on the east end near Menager Dam.

\$3 million

Annual cost to the Nation of dealing with border-related issues such as paying for autopsies, investigating the deaths and responding to crimes such as break-ins, robberies and vehicle theft committed by illegal entrants and their guides.

\$2.5 million to \$3 million

Cost to Indian Health Service to provide care to illegal entrants who succumb to exposure.

Source: Tohono O'odham Nation, Border Patrol.

• *Contact reporter Brady McCombs at 573-4213 or bmccombs@azstarnet.com.*

All content copyright © 1999-2007 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.