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Gov.: Leave Guard on border

Halt pullout, she asks feds

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — Gov. Janet Napolitano wants federal officials to halt the withdrawal of National Guard troops from along the U.S.-Mexican border.

"The drawdown of Operation Jump Start's strength level is ill-timed and should be halted and reexamined," the governor said in a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

The program, started last year, was designed to put 6,000 Guard soldiers along the border — 2,400 of them in Arizona — to make up for a shortage of Border Patrol officers.

Napolitano said Operation Jump Start "has made real progress" in cutting the number of people sneaking into this country illegally.

The governor said, though, the Border Patrol is still not up to the strength promised. And she wants the withdrawal of soldiers, which started July 1, stopped.

Napolitano's letter, however, comes too late to halt the immediate loss.

National Guard Maj. Paul Aguirre reported that as of Friday the first half of the withdrawal had been completed.

There are now only about 1,200 Guard soldiers along the border in Arizona, a number that was not supposed to be reached before the end of the month.

And federal officials are giving a cool response to any request to alter the target of having the rest of the soldiers gone by next July.

Russ Knocke, spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, said it was always made clear to border governors that Operation Jump Start was temporary.

The idea was to have soldiers handling functions ranging from fence-building and maintenance to surveillance, freeing up the Border Patrol officers to apprehend border crossers.

It also gave the Border Patrol a chance to hire and train new officers.

He said that plan is working, and the agency is "on target" for increasing its ranks.

He said 2,300 officers have been added since 2006, bringing total strength nationwide up to more than 14,000.

That includes nearly 300 in the Tucson Sector, which covers the area from the New Mexico border to the Yuma County line; and more than 125 in the Yuma Sector, which goes west from there through the Imperial sand dunes in California.

Knocke said another 600 will be on board nationwide by the end of September, with 3,000 more a year later.

And he said Customs and Border Protection, the Border Patrol's parent agency, also has added about 650 administrative staffers nationwide since Operation Jump Start began, and they are handling some of the jobs National Guard soldiers were doing.

"So you've got a significant investment in terms of more Border Patrol, with more coming," he said. "You've got more fencing with more coming, more vehicular barriers with more coming."

Napolitano is faring no better with the Department of Defense. Lt. Col. Les' Melnyk, a department press officer, said Gates doesn't intend to alter the plans to end Operation Jump Start next year.

"Any adjustment to this plan would be made by the president," he said.

Gubernatorial press aide Jeanine L'Ecuyer said replacing the withdrawing National Guard troops from around the nation with soldiers from the Arizona National Guard is not an option.

Some Arizona soldiers have been part of Operation Jump Start since it started last year. But the cost of their deployment is picked up by the federal government rather than state taxpayers.

Costs aside, L'Ecuyer said there just aren't enough available Guard soldiers from Arizona to make up the difference.

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