

Border czar eyes civilian helpers to assist agents

'Citizen effort' proposal follows patrols in California, Arizona

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The top U.S. border enforcement official, in what would be a significant change in approach, said yesterday that he is exploring the idea of having civilian volunteers work with the Border Patrol.

"We value having eyes and ears of citizens, and I think that would be one of the things we are looking at is how you better organize, let's say, a citizen effort," Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Robert C. Bonner told The Associated Press.

The proposal comes in the wake of civilian patrols in California and Arizona this year. Customs and Border Protection spokesman Michael Fleming said Bonner supports efforts by groups such as the civilians patrolling the border near Campo and the Minutemen who operated in Arizona this spring.

"It is actually as a result of seeing that there is the possibility in local border communities, and maybe even beyond, of having citizens that would be willing to volunteer to help the Border Patrol – but with some training and being organized in a way that would be something akin to a Border Patrol auxiliary," Bonner said.

But he and other top government officials, including President Bush, have said in the past that such groups, if armed, risk becoming vigilantes.

"There's a danger that not just illegal migrants might get hurt, but that American citizens might get hurt in this situation," Bonner said in February.

Customs and Border Protection, which includes the Border Patrol and is part of the Homeland Security Department, had yet to tell Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff and other top department officials of its discussions about a Border Patrol auxiliary, although they would be briefed once the agency came up with a proposal, agency spokeswoman Kristi Clemens said.

"All proposals are being considered, including clerical work by volunteers that would free up more agents to secure our borders," Clemens said.

Another plan, the creation of a state border-policing agency, is addressed in a statewide ballot initiative for next year's ballot. If it is approved, the California Border Patrol would be authorized to enter into an agreement with the federal government to enforce federal immigration laws.

The cost of the proposal is uncertain, depending on the size of the force, but the state's legislative analyst estimated the tab at \$200 million annually for every 1,000 uniformed officers. That does not include startup costs.

Proponents of the California Border Police Act have had their initiative cleared by the Attorney General's Office to collect signatures.

"We're starting the signature drive," said Dave Gilliard, a sponsor of the measure.

Gilliard said backers have to collect about 598,000 signatures by Dec. 12 to place their constitutional amendment on the June primary election ballot.

The idea of an official Border Patrol auxiliary received a lukewarm reception from Jim Gilchrist, who organized the Minuteman Project.

"I'm skeptical," he said. "For 20 years, people like me have been disappointed time and time again by our federal government."

Gilchrist said he fears a volunteer force would detract from efforts to add more Border Patrol agents and immigration and customs investigators.

"We don't feel it's really going to work," he said. "They don't have an adequate police force. . . . The solution is actually a full-time force."

Gilchrist called an auxiliary "tantamount to a ride-along," but said he would sign up if such a service existed.

Union officials said they worry that the move would align the Border Patrol with the controversial civilian groups.

"This is a way to embrace them even more and making it look like they're interested in securing the border," said Chris Bauder, president of National Border Patrol Council Local 1613, which represents local agents.

"They wouldn't need to do this if they came up with a national strategy that makes sense," Bauder said. "The Border Patrol will never be successful if all they do is focus on the border."

"All we're doing is focusing on the supply of cheap labor, not the demand. That's just one more aspect of the dog-and-pony show."

San Diego Latino activist Enrique Morones, who protested in Campo against the civilian patrol last weekend, called Bonner's statements outrageous.

"We've been saying all along, 'Leave the enforcement of the border to the law enforcement people,' " Morones said. "Now he says we need an auxiliary?"

"It will be a license for civilian vigilantes. To have somebody from the Border Patrol make a statement like that, it's totally irresponsible."

The details of the proposal – including whether the volunteers would be armed or even in the field – haven't been worked out, Fleming said.

"It's just a proposal," he said, noting that Bonner has yet to decide whether to formally support such an auxiliary.

Among the volunteer groups the agency would examine as models are auxiliaries for local sheriff's departments and the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, Bonner said.

In San Diego County, the Sheriff's Department uses senior volunteers, who have attended an academy, to drive around and report suspicious activity, but they are trained not to try to enforce the law themselves.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department has 5,000 volunteers who do paperwork and occasionally direct traffic at crime scenes, spokesman Steve Whitmore said.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary has 30,000 members who are trained to help with non-law enforcement programs such as public education, vessel safety checks, safety patrols, search and rescue, and maritime security, according to its Web site. Auxiliary members don't carry guns and have no more right than regular citizens to detain someone, Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Jeff Carter said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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