

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4315

May 4, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
4000 Defense Blvd
Washington, D.C. 20231

Secretary Llyod J. Austin III,

We write you today to share our concerns, and those of our fellow Texans, regarding the crisis at our Southern border and to request your support for the Tactical Aerostat Systems (TAS). TAS are necessary for our border patrol agents to secure the border. They provide agents with real-time intelligence, enhance their ability to prosecute by recording seizures and arrest events, and provide high-definition imagery. However, according to recent reports, the Biden Administration does not see their value. It has come to our attention that the Administration plans to reduce the number of TAS along our Southern border at a time when migrants and drugs are flooding into our country.

Our request is for the Department of Defense (DOD) to continue support of the 17-meter aerostats, and to loan or transfer through the DOD re-use program 22-meter systems to eventually replace the 17-meter systems. The 17-meter systems currently in the possession of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection were acquired through the DOD re-use program at the beginning of the TAS deployment in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in 2012 – over 10 years ago. Today, the TAS program in the RGV consists of four 17-meter aerostat systems, of which three are deployed within the Rio Grande Station and one within the McAllen Station area.

In FY2022, the RGV sector accounted for approximately 43 percent of all marijuana seizures and 21 percent of all apprehensions along the southwest border. The RGV sector currently utilizes its four aerostat systems to help catch and respond to criminal activity in the section of the border. Given that the aerostats act as a deterrent, border patrol agents fear their removal from the RGV sector will result in an increase of illicit activity and drug trafficking as their detection capability decreases.

Aerostats in the Rio Grande City station were credited for 14.25 percent of all their marijuana seizures, 11.01 percent of cocaine seizures, 9.72 percent of apprehensions, and 12.78 percent of turn backs. In the first three months of 2023, aerostats detected 10,775 people crossing our southern border, which has led to 8,608 apprehensions and 1,669 turn backs. Additionally, the aerostats are credited with helping to seize 911.77 pounds of marijuana this year alone.

Given the challenging terrain and sheer size of the Rio Grande Valley, border patrol agents have a limited amount of technological enhancements and infrastructure capabilities at their disposal. As a result, the Valley is highly dependent on aerostat capabilities to assist in combatting the high levels of human and narcotics trafficking. The elimination of the aerostats would leave the Rio Grande Valley exposed with no replacement capability.

Simply put, the elimination of tactical aerostat systems at the border would crumble operational effectiveness, put the safety of our border agents at risk, and threaten the wellbeing of the public in one of the highest traffic areas of illegal immigrants in the country.

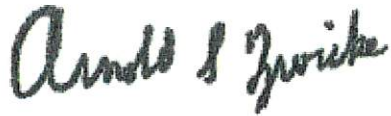
The use of TAS in securing our border cannot be understated. We are asking you, along with the President, to listen to those on the front lines. Our agents at the border need all the available tools and funding to adequately perform their job and respond to the threats attempting to enter our country.

We ask that you urge President Biden to reconsider his decision to reduce the number of TAS systems currently in operation at our Southern border and to adequately fund them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MONICA DE LA CRUZ', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Monica De La Cruz
Member of Congress
15th District of Texas



Arnold S. Zwicke
Sheriff, Guadalupe County, TX



Cynthia Carrasco
Mayor, City of Alice, TX



Urbino "Benny" Martinez
Sheriff, Brooks County, TX



Javier Villalobos
Mayor, McAllen, TX



J.E. "Eddie" Guerra
Sheriff, Hidalgo County, TX



Norie Gonzalez Garza
Mayor, Mission, TX



Diana Martinez
Mayor, City of Alamo, TX



Dr. Ambrosio Hernandez
Mayor, City of Pharr, TX



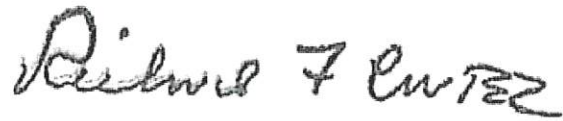
Cecelia Gonzalez-Dippel
Mayor, Floresville, TX



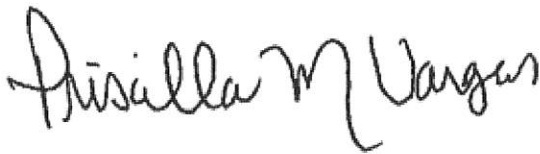
Fred del Barrio
Mayor, City of Palmhurst, TX



Ricardo "Rick" Villarreal
Mayor, City of Palmview, TX



Richard F. Cortez
Judge, Hidalgo County, TX



Priscilla Vargas
Mayor, City of Premont, TX



Pedro "Pete" Trevino Jr.
Judge, Jim Wells County, TX



Ramiro Garza
Mayor, City of Edinburg, TX



Henry L. Whitman, Jr.
Judge, Wilson County, TX