



TESTIMONY ON HOUSE BILL 674

BY **Ammon Blair**, Texas Public Policy Foundation

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Dear Chairman Hefner and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 674. My name is Ammon Blair, and I am a Senior Fellow for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. My testimony today draws directly from my experience as a Border Patrol Agent in the Rio Grande Valley Sector, specifically at the Rio Grande City Station in Starr County, and subsequently as a Texas Army National Guard Officer serving on Operation Lone Star.

The Situation on the Ground

During my service as a Border Patrol Agent and later as an officer on Operation Lone Star, I witnessed firsthand how criminal elements systematically evade law enforcement checkpoints. Cartels exploit Texas' privately owned border terrain, using gated private property, ranch roads, cutting fences, damaging gates, and leveraging advanced surveillance technologies such as drones and encrypted communications.

These tactics often escalate into high-speed pursuits, endangering civilians, causing fatalities, and inflicting severe property damage. In October 2020, in Hebbronville, Texas—80 miles north of the border—cartel-affiliated “load drivers” were heavily armed while smuggling illegal aliens. A widely circulated video from this incident showed smugglers in facemasks, camouflage, and tactical gear, with at least one carrying an automatic rifle outfitted with a quad rail, high-capacity drum magazine, scope, and fore-grip.

This was likely not an isolated incident, as the only reason it came to light was the smuggler’s arrogance in posting it on social media. The smugglers originated from Starr County, using private ranch roads to bypass the Border Patrol checkpoint near Hebbronville (see **Figure 1**). Cartels deliberately leverage these rural, privately owned areas to avoid detection, evade capture, and move large groups of illegal aliens or contraband with minimal resistance.

Unlike other border states, where vast tracts of federally owned land allow for unrestricted law enforcement patrols, Texas’ extensive private land ownership limits access for law enforcement. Cartels exploit these jurisdictional constraints to establish predictable smuggling corridors across ranches, avoiding detection for miles before dispersing further inland. During my time in the field, I personally

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witnessed repeat smugglers using private ranch roads to evade capture, leaving behind damaged property, injured civilians, and overwhelmed law enforcement stretched thin.

One case I was personally involved with in Roma, Texas, involved a repeat smuggler who sought to evade arrest. The resulting high-speed chase ended in tragedy, seriously injuring multiple people and causing a fatality (see **Figures 2** and **3**).

Why Stronger Penalties Are Necessary

Prosecution policies for checkpoint evasion shift between administrations, leading to inconsistent enforcement and unpredictable consequences for smugglers. Federal priorities change, and prosecutorial discretion often results in lenient enforcement or outright case dismissals, especially when resources are stretched thin. As a result, cartels and their smuggling organizations understand that penalties at the federal level are inconsistent, and often unenforced—turning checkpoint evasion into a low-risk, high-reward crime.

Many times, federal penalties for checkpoint evasion are insufficient—little more than a “cost of doing business” for cartels and repeat smugglers. The lack of meaningful legal consequences has created a revolving door for offenders, where smugglers who are apprehended simply return to their criminal activities within days or weeks, knowing that prosecution is unlikely or, at worst, will result in minimal penalties.

House Bill 674 will close these gaps by establishing meaningful state-level penalties, ensuring that smugglers face real consequences—even when federal prosecution is inconsistent or ineffective. By increasing penalties, this bill will:

- Hold criminals accountable rather than allowing them to cycle through the system repeatedly.
- Reduce repeat offenses by making smuggling operations riskier, more costly, and less profitable.
- Strengthen deterrence, making Texas a harder target for cartels that rely on checkpoint evasion as a core part of their smuggling strategy.

Without stronger state-level enforcement, Texas remains at the mercy of shifting federal policies that have already proven inadequate at deterring cartel activity. This bill is not just about enforcement—it is about protecting Texas communities, securing private property, and ensuring that law enforcement efforts are not wasted on repeat offenders who face no real consequences under current laws.

Federal enforcement alone has failed to deter cartel-affiliated smuggling operations, allowing repeat offenders to exploit weak penalties and inconsistent prosecution. House Bill 674 is a necessary and overdue step to close this gap and ensure that Texas law enforcement has the tools needed to hold criminals accountable.

Addressing Potential Concerns

Some may argue that this bill could lead to overcriminalization or unintended consequences for innocent individuals. However, House Bill 674 specifically targets deliberate criminal acts, not accidental wrong turns. Based on my firsthand experience, smugglers exhibit clear signs of intent—using spotters, scouts, counter-surveillance, and coordinated communications—making their actions easily distinguishable from innocent mistakes.

Concerns about civil liberties are also unfounded, as the burden of proof remains on law enforcement and prosecution. This bill ensures that innocent citizens are not inadvertently penalized, while those engaged in deliberate smuggling and evasion face the consequences they deserve.

There is concern that high-speed pursuits endanger communities, causing accidents, injuries, and loss of life. However, the reality is that weak penalties actively encourage these pursuits, making them more frequent and more dangerous. Smugglers understand that the risk of serious legal consequences is minimal, and as a result, they choose to flee rather than comply with law enforcement.

In my experience, multiple high-speed chases occurred daily, creating a near-constant threat to public safety. Smugglers have no incentive to stop because they know that if they evade capture, they are free to continue their operations, and even if apprehended, the consequences are often negligible. This calculated risk-reward assessment emboldens cartel operatives and human smugglers, who treat Texas roads like their own personal highways, with no regard for civilian lives.

House Bill 674 directly addresses these issues by increasing penalties, creating a real deterrent, and ensuring that Texas law enforcement has the tools necessary to hold criminals accountable. This bill will make our highways safer, protect law enforcement officers, and disrupt cartel smuggling operations that currently exploit weak laws to operate with impunity.

Conclusion

Federal enforcement alone has failed to deter cartel-affiliated smuggling operations, allowing repeat offenders to exploit weak penalties and inconsistent prosecution. House Bill 674 is a necessary and overdue step to close this gap and ensure that Texas law enforcement has the tools needed to hold criminals accountable. I respectfully ask the committee to support this critical legislation to protect Texas communities and restore law and order along our roads and border regions.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.

Figure 1:

Heavily armed smugglers in Hebbronville, Texas, 2020.



Figure 2:

Smuggler evading resulting in rollover, Roma, TX.



Figure 3:

Smuggler evading resulting in rollover, Roma, TX.



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