

# EL Paso/Mexico Border Trip May 2023

## Representative Jacyn Gallagher

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023, a small group of us Idahoans set off on a fact seeking mission to the border of Mexico at El Paso Texas, including Senator Tammy Nichols and myself. We headed toward the 3<sup>rd</sup> most dangerous city in the world Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

We arrived in El Paso on Wednesday May 10<sup>th</sup>, one day before Title 42 was going to be lifted by the Biden administration.

Once settled, we met with several other journalists including Michael Yon, independent war and border correspondent and journalist along with Anthony Aguero also an independent journalist, currently on assignment on the Texas border with Real Americas Voice. There were many other journalists we met along the border all reporting on the effects of Title 42 being lifted.

The conversation with Michael Yon was especially enlightening to me, as I had never heard of the Darien Gap and the border crosser situation there. Michael has spent years at the Darien gap watching border crossers tempting to cross the extremely dangerous Gap from Columbia into Panama, where many Non-Governmental Agencies (NGO'S) will help them make their way to Mexico, to then cross into the U.S. The Darien Gap route is so dangerous that female adults and children are given rape kits, as it is almost guaranteed they will be raped as they cross. Day after pills and male and female condoms are included in the rape kits given to females. The migrants are also given elaborate maps with different routes to Mexico with stops along the way where they can get assistance.

After our initial meeting with Anthony Aguero, he then guided us to multiple border areas. We were in areas that have a very high Cartel presence and control. Anthony has spent a lot of time on the Texas border and knows it well, he mentioned several times that we shouldn't stay too long in one place as the cartels communicate with spotters and it is not safe. The safety of Texans living in border towns has declined with the influx of border crossers, many ranchers and landowners are afraid to speak out in fear of retaliation by the cartels. Cartels are alive and well along the border of Texas. Many Border agents won't go near some areas as it is too dangerous.

As we made our way along the border, there were different types of walls or fencing on the border, with the Trump era wall being the most protective. We were in areas where there were no walls or fencing at all, the border was just wide open. Most of these areas were next to wide open fields of sage brush, where under the cover of night, border crossers can cross into the U.S. with ease, there are not enough border patrol agents to keep up with the number of people crossing into the US. We saw a LOT of trash, mostly water bottles, shoes and shoelaces all along the border, at the border crossings there were dumpsters full of garbage. The shoelaces are asked to be removed by border agents for safety reasons, as they could be used as weapons.

At two different locations along the wall, we were shown tunnels, one dug out by hand, that the border crossers use for shelter to keep cool as they wait for someone to pick them up on the US side. One tunnel went directly to the Mexican side, and there were no border patrol agents anywhere to be seen. Another border wall area we were shown was along the Rio Grande River, this area of fence was built with private funds and there was a legal dispute with the International Boundary and Water Commission over levee access, at the time we were there, the gate was chained open, allowing free access from Mexico to the US.

In another area along the border, we watched 3 border crossers with backpacks cross the border in broad daylight, they were met by border agents that pointed in the direction of the border crossing and they headed that direction. This was in broad daylight, out in the open, and our government helping them get to the border crossing where they will be able to enter the US.

We drove passed Old Fort Bliss, which is located very near the Mexican border, there are still some great old buildings located there. The Abara organization has purchased the site and is planning to build a border crosser center.

After dark we drove back to the border with our guide Anthony to experience the border at night. We saw many areas of fence that had been cut open by cartels to gain access to the US, some of these cut open spaces were covered with pallets. In one section the fence was being propped up with cut up fence posts. Nearby, were steel border wall posts that were never used to construct solid walls.

While we were at the border in the evening, there were helicopters flying overhead using search lights, and we could see a few border patrol trucks.

One of the interesting things I observed were the buses that were on the Mexico side of the wall/fence at night, many of them had flashing lights on them, and I saw at least 10 buses go by as we were in the area of cut fencing. As we later saw the DHS buses being loaded to come into the US, my guess is the buses I saw on the Mexico side were transporting border crossers from other countries to the Mexican border to cross into the US.

On this night at the border, we were joined by Sheriff Greg Capers (San Jacinto County Texas) and Walter West of Texas. Sheriff Greg and Walter shared their border experiences in their area, and answered many questions we had about the border invasion we are experiencing.

We had heard through several media sources that there was going to be a press conference the morning of May 11<sup>th</sup> from 9 to 11 am at Gate 42. We arrived close to 9:00am and there was a lot of media present. We waited, and the time of the conference kept getting pushed back, we were waiting in the hot sun and being moved to make way for the buses that were supposed to arrive to pick up border crossers.

11:30 came and went with no conference. We did see a very large empty dumpster being delivered to the Mexico side of the border. At gate 42 you can't see the Mexico side of the wall, but I noticed a guy using his drone to film the other side, I asked if I could watch what he was seeing, there were two lines of migrants probably 350-400 feet long each and there were giant piles of garbage, that must have been what the dumpsters were for.

We ventured over to Ciudad Juarez for lunch and as we were leaving, there was a man lying on the sidewalk outside of the restaurant throwing up blood with Police standing around him. This was a good visual showing we have no idea what kinds of diseases the border crossers are bringing with them as they come into the US.

After lunch we went back into El Paso and headed to Sacred Heart Catholic Church, a known shelter for border crossers, we saw mostly young men on cell phones, many people had red cross blankets and there were a few long rows of port-a-potties. There were probably a few hundred border crossers when we were there but speaking with media that had been there the prior week, they said there had been thousands. We noticed signs on the fence of the church posted by the Border network for human rights that said "If you are arrested, you have the right not to sign any document you don't understand, to call a lawyer and to present your case before a judge" with a phone number to call. There was also a sign in Spanish that looked like different numbers to call for churches, hospitals, weddings and a picture of three raised fists.

Our final evening in Texas we drove to one of the processing centers, it was massive, with giant tents. We were told that, that location was expanding and that they have 23 acres.

Back at the border at gate 42 we witnessed the buses coming to pick up the border crossers, in less than an hour we saw 4 buses drive up to the border wall and load people on the buses to take them to nearby processing centers. Each bus had approximately 40 seats. The DHS representatives that were there were trying very hard to block the media from seeing the border crossers being loaded onto the buses. Some of the border agents were very aggressive in their methods to protect them. Border patrol agents were armed. I was told by a Department of Homeland Security Representative that I needed to respect the privacy of the border crossers, she didn't tell me not to film, but continued to repeat that I needed to respect their privacy.

In Summary, the US/Mexico border is open, and millions of border crossers are entering the US. With this comes disease, sex trafficking, child trafficking, drug trafficking, crime, increased need for housing and a strain on social services including hospitals. We cannot just sit by and allow this invasion of our country; our country cannot sustain the influx of border crossers that are coming into the US.

I hope the Governor's office is taking this seriously, and not just for the drug issue this is contributing to, but in all matters I have mentioned above.