

Ex-US drug czar: Move cargo checks away from border

By Ramon Bracamontes \ EL PASO TIMES

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Ponderous cargo inspections on the U.S.-Mexico border are killing commerce and will hurt America's overall economy, a national security expert said Tuesday in El Paso.

Retired Army Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, a former U.S. drug czar and member of President Clinton's Cabinet, said the United States should break bottlenecks at the border by limiting inspections. Most of these checks of cargo can be carried out in the interior of the United States and Mexico, he said.

For instance, McCaffrey said, if a shipment of goods left Chihuahua City for Detroit, it would be inspected by Mexican officials and sealed in Mexico but not be checked by U.S. agents until it arrived at its destination.

"In this day and age, it's crazy to think that you are going to inspect on the El Paso-Juárez border," he said. "We cannot strangle ourselves economically while providing security along the border. You can't inspect cargo at the border in the middle of an urban area anymore."

McCaffrey served in the Army for 32 years and retired as a four-star general. He is now a U.S. government consultant. He was the keynote speaker at the Border to Border Transportation Conference at the Judson F. William Convention Center. The conference continues today and Thursday.

Mayor John Cook, who was at the conference, supported McCaffrey's thesis. Cook said the ports of entry in this area were built in the 1960s and '70s, before the North American Free Trade Agreement and before the twin-plant industry in Juárez boomed.

Nowadays about 14,000 El Pasoans work in Juárez, and the two cities do about \$42 million worth of trade each year.

"Our bridges were not built for today," Cook said. "We need to make sure we are in a competitive global environment by inspecting only what is needed."

McCaffrey said improvements to border commerce are needed now because the U.S. cannot wait for the drug war in Mexico to end. Mexico is the second-largest trade partner of the U.S. -- Canada is first.

As for the drug war in Mexico, McCaffrey said, it will take an additional five years to wind down. Mexico has been mired in violence since 2008. More than 30,000 homicides tied to the war have occurred since 2008, when Mexican President Felipe Calderón vowed to rid the country of the cartels.

The U.S. is helping Mexico by providing intelligence, equipment and money to reconstitute the country.

"Inevitably we are going to win this," McCaffrey said. "There will be a struggle and part of it may go on for 20 years, but there is no way we, the U.S. and Mexico, don't win this."

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