

Utah Gov. Cox joins GOP 'strike force' targeted at southwestern border

The Cox administration said it didn't have plans to send troopers or intelligence analysts to the border, but would consider a request if asked.

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Utah Gov. Spencer Cox has joined a multi-state 'strike force' to address U.S.-Mexico border security and "disrupt and dismantle the transnational criminal organizations taking advantage of Joe Biden's open border."

A coalition called the American Governors' Border Strike Force, made up of Cox and 25 other Republican governors, said it plans to send law enforcement to train in border states to halt border-related crime and share criminal justice information and intelligence with each other to help with investigations. Cox's senior advisor for federal affairs, Gordon Larsen, said Utah intelligence analysts say transnational drug trafficking networks operating in Utah linked to drug cartels in Mexico are the primary source of illegal drugs in the state, posing a threat to Utahns.

"Gov. Cox joined the border strike force to formalize and enhance many of the intelligence sharing and law enforcement practices our Department of Public Safety already engages in with other states," Larsen said in a statement to The Salt Lake Tribune.

Some conservatives, along with former President Donald Trump, have claimed that drug trafficking and illegal immigration into the U.S. has increased since President Joe Biden took office.

"With deadly fentanyl, dangerous criminals and even terrorists crossing the border, every town in America is now a border town. Thanks to Governor Cox, Utah's law enforcement resources will be part of the solution to securing our border," according to an email from RNC spokesperson Alex Kuehler. The state does not have plans to send troopers or intelligence analysts to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding to the southwestern frontier, Larsen added, "but could consider a request if asked."

Last year, Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott launched a controversial border security initiative called Operation Lone Star that deployed thousands of state troopers and Texas National Guard members amid a surge of border crossings. Abbott claimed sending troops to the border was necessary to stop drug trafficking and illegal border crossings. The initiative is setting back Texas taxpayers about \$2.5 million a week, according to a 2022 investigation by The Texas Tribune, ProPublica and The Marshall Project.

Since 2016, fentanyl seizures by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection have continuously risen, according to a 2021 report from the Drug Enforcement Administration. Data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, show fentanyl seizures increased sharply in June of 2020 and peaked in October and December of 2020 while Trump was still in office.

Experts and immigrant advocates say migrants arriving at the U.S. southwestern border are leaving their countries for a number of reasons, including escaping gang violence, looking to improve their economic opportunities and natural disasters.

During his tenure, Cox has been receptive to welcoming refugees to the Beehive State. Utah recently welcomed just over 900 Afghan arrivals who fled Taliban-governed Afghanistan – the largest

resettlement in state history. In March, the Republican governor also expressed support for welcoming Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion of the eastern European country to Utah.

In March, U.S. border patrol agents arrested 210,000 migrants trying to cross the southwestern border – the highest number of border-crossing attempts in 20 years. The Biden administration currently has in place a Trump-era public health order called Title 42 that prevents asylum seekers from entering the U.S. amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That directive expiring next month could lead to a “potential increase” in migrants encountered at the border, according to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas. Attorney General Sean Reyes said he supported Cox’s support for border states like Texas.

“Every state in America is a border state today. Because so much illicit activity is flooding up through our Southern border, drugs, guns and criminal perpetrators can drive or fly and be in the Midwest, Northeast, Mountain West or anywhere in America in days or even hours,” Reyes said in a statement to The Tribune.

Valentina De Fex, a staff attorney for the ACLU of Utah, condemned Cox’s decision to join the 26-state task force and said Congress already allocates funds to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

“We are deeply disappointed in Governor Cox’s decision to join the ‘American Governors’ Border Strike Force.’ The creation of this task force appears to be a misguided attempt by states to override federal authority over immigration policy. Since 2017, the U.S. has adopted cruel and irresponsible border policies including family separation, Remain in Mexico, and Title 42 that have used “public health” and “border security” as an excuse to deny individuals the right to seek asylum, which has never been a crime.” De Fex said in a statement. “Utah does not need to use local taxpayer dollars to further fund this cruelty.”

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