Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks to the Border Summit

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Wednesday, August 22, 2001

Thank you Senator Lucio. President Nevarez, UT-Pan American is to be commended for its vision and leadership in hosting this unprecedented border summit in the beautiful Texas town of Edinburg. My friends from Mexico, including Governor Tomas Yarrington Ruvalcaba of Tamaulipas, and Governor Fernando Canales Clariond of Nuevo Leon, it is an honor to be in your presence. I want to extend my gratitude to our Mexican neighbors for hosting me this July as I sought to learn one of the world’s great languages, Spanish. I enjoyed your hospitality, and was grateful for your patience as I worked on my vocabulary. No longer do I refer to “la verdad” as “la verdura.” I am delighted to see friends from the U.S. side of the border as well, including our distinguished members of the Legislature, and our county and city leaders along the border.

Today we begin a new dialogue about our shared future, a future of promising potential if we work together to solve the challenges we both face. It is fitting that we convene this summit where the great, meandering river known as the Rio Grande – or the Rio Bravo – forms the long border between Texas and Mexico. In years past, that famed body of water has been seen by many as a dividing point. If you were to walk along its banks and look to the other side, based on the stereotypes of the past, you would think you were seeing things a million miles away, instead of a stone’s throw away. But I am here today to say that while we have honest differences, there is more that unites us than divides us. The Rio Grande does not separate two nations, it joins two peoples. Mexico and the United States have a shared history, and a common future. And it is along this border where we will either fail or succeed in addressing the education, health care and transportation needs of our two peoples.

Critical to our future is meeting our border infrastructure needs. We must get traffic moving along the border so that businesses along the border and thousands of miles away can deliver products on time, and continue to grow. Companies from Spokane, Washington to Concord, New Hampshire depend on Texas highways and Texas bridges to move their products south. Seventy percent of all U.S.-Mexico truck traffic goes to, or through, the Lone Star state. Fifteen of our twenty-seven border crossings with Mexico are located in Texas. Fifty-four percent of all U.S.-Mexico trade crosses just between Brownsville and Laredo. This year the Texas legislature appropriated approximately $1 billion more in transportation funding. But more can be done.

With Texas serving as the Gateway to Mexico, it is time that we receive congressional funding that reflects the instrumental role our state plays as a port of entry. With a Texan in the White House, I believe there is no greater opportunity to end the funding discrimination that crippled Texas infrastructure under the previous administration. Good
infrastructure is essential to the free flow of commerce. It is a matter of economic fact that free trade lifts the tide for all the boats in the harbor. U.S. trade with Mexico has increased by 500% since 1994. Exports and imports between Texas and Mexico now exceed $100 billion dollars annually. Thousands of jobs have been created for Texas and Mexican workers, confirming the indisputable fact that trade with Mexico is big business for Texas.

The fruits of NAFTA have just begun to ripen. At the same time, we must not allow the roots of the tree to become poisoned. The NAFTA agreement not only signaled a new era of economic possibility, but a new era of bi-national cooperation. That is why it is wrong, and inherently detrimental to our relationship with Mexico for the U.S. Congress to pursue a protectionist policy that forbids Mexican trucks from U.S. roadways. It is bad public policy, and it violates the terms of the NAFTA agreement we agreed to. Mexican trucks that meet our safety standards should be given the same access to U.S. roads as our Canadian neighbors to the north.

Mexico, too, must be vigilant in realizing its treaty obligations. For more than half a century, under the 1944 Water Treaty our two nations have cooperated so that the water needs of both countries are met. But as of late, Mexico is behind in delivering the water it has promised to the U.S. A Mexican judicial injunction now threatens the livelihood of our Rio Grande Valley farmers, and has become a source of contention between our two nations. It is time to end this dispute. I would ask that the Mexican government meet its obligation under the treaty, Texas growers are depending on it.

There are other challenges that require a unified approach, especially in the area of health care. A lack of preventative medicine means conditions that could have been eliminated through childhood immunizations show up in disturbing numbers later in life. Limited availability of medical specialists means conditions like heart disease and diabetes go untreated at alarming rates. In Texas, we recently placed a strong emphasis on preventative care when we expanded access to Medicaid for more low-income children by making the Medicaid enrollment process simpler. We allocated an additional $4 billion to the Medicaid program, and more than $900 million to the Children's Health Insurance Program. I urged legislators to pass a telemedicine pilot program that will enable, through technology, a sick border resident of limited financial means to receive care from a specialist hundreds of miles away. But the effort to combat disease and illness requires greater cooperative efforts between our two nations. It is a simple truth that disease knows no boundaries. An outbreak of drug-resistant tuberculosis, for example, endangers citizens of both our nations. We have much to gain if we work together to expand preventative care, and treat maladies unique to this region.

Legislation authored by border legislators Pat Haggerty and Eddie Lucio establishes an important study that will look at the feasibility of bi-national health insurance. This study recognizes that the Mexican and U.S. sides of the border compose one region, and we must address health care problems throughout that region. That's why I am also excited that Texas Secretary of State Henry Cuellar is working on an initiative that could extend the benefits of telemedicine to individuals living on the Mexican side of the border.

As a compassionate state, we know that for our children to succeed, they must not only be healthy, but educated. The future leaders of our two nations are learning their fractions and their ABC's in classrooms all along this border. Immigrants from around the world are being taught in Texas classrooms, and our history is rich with examples of new citizens who have made great contributions. We must say to every Texas child learning in a Texas classroom, "we don't care where you come from, but where you are going, and we are going to do everything we can to help you get there." And that vision must include the children of undocumented workers. That's why Texas took the national lead in allowing such deserving young minds to attend a Texas college at a resident rate. Those young minds are a part of a new generation of leaders, the doors of higher education must be open to them. The message is simple: educacion es el futuro, y si se puede.

We also know that poverty is not unique to either side of the border. Some of Texas’ poorest citizens live in colonias all along the border. They often lack basic infrastructure many of us take for granted. Just today, the North American Development Bank announced it will provide $6.3 million in funding to hook up colonia residents in six border cities to
water and wastewater lines. More than 18,000 residents will benefit from these water or wastewater hookups. And this November, by approving Proposition 2, Texas voters can ensure that their neighbors in colonias have quality roads so that school buses, emergency vehicles and postal trucks can reach residents, and residents can get to a job or a school reliably.

President Fox’s vision for an open border is a vision I embrace, as long as we demonstrate the will to address the obstacles to it. An open border means poverty has given way to opportunity, and Mexico’s citizens do not feel compelled to cross the border to find that opportunity. It means we have addressed pollution concerns, made substantial progress in stopping the spread of disease, and rid our crossings of illicit drug smuggling activity. Clearly we have a long way to go in addressing those issues. At the same time we must continue to deepen our economic ties, expanding opportunities for Mexican and U.S. companies to do business on both sides of the border. The outlook is promising, even if the road to prosperity is a long one. We share a bond as neighbors, and we find our culture north of the Rio Grande to be increasingly defined by the strong traits of people of Hispanic descent. Texas has long enjoyed a unique identity, an identity forged by an independent spirit, and the convergence of many different peoples. We must welcome change in the 21st Century as we have in every century before it.

Today, as we look to the south, we see a rising sun. It is perched above a people whose best days are in front of them. Let us endeavor to make the most of this new day through a new dialogue. Let us work together to combat disease, expand trade and provide educational opportunities. If we do, there are no limits to what we can accomplish for the betterment of all of our citizens. Thank you, and God bless you.