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In Case You Missed It

FEDERAL OFFICIAL SAYS MARTINEZ HAS TAKEN ON CARTEL MEMBERS

“The Head Of The Federal Agency That Coordinates The Fight Against Drug Trafficking In New Mexico Says Susana Martinez’s Claim That She Has ‘Taken On Members Of The Most Violent Mexican Drug Cartels’ Is Accurate. Ernesto Ortiz, Director Of The New Mexico High Intensity Drug Traffic Area (HIDTA), Said The Battle Against Cartel Drug Smuggling Doesn’t Happen Without Local And Federal Law Enforcement Officials Cooperating, And Martinez’s Office Plays An Integral Role.” – NMPolitics.net’s Heath Haussamen

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Read this article online at: <http://www.nmpolitics.net/index/2010/06/federal-official-says-martinez-has-taken-on-cartel-members/>

The head of the federal agency that coordinates the fight against drug trafficking in New Mexico says [Susana Martinez’s](#) claim that she has “taken on members of the most violent Mexican drug cartels” is accurate.

Ernesto Ortiz, director of the New Mexico [High Intensity Drug Traffic Area](#) (HIDTA), said the battle against cartel drug smuggling doesn’t happen without local and federal law enforcement officials cooperating, and Martinez’s office plays an integral role. Martinez, Doña Ana County’s district attorney, is also on the HIDTA board.

Ortiz’s comments follow a [Santa Fe New Mexican article](#) that stated that, because nearly all drug cases prosecuted in state court don’t involve high-level cartel members, “the cartel members (Martinez has) taken on are relatively small fish.” That led to an

accusation from the state Democratic Party that Martinez is exaggerating her record. Martinez, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, has made the claim that she's taken on cartel members in two TV ads ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Law enforcement agencies in the New Mexico HIDTA region are involved in Operation Up The Ladder, which is aimed at stopping cartel drug smuggling by catching those The New Mexican called "small fish" and working its way up through prosecution, intelligence sharing and other efforts.

The seven district attorneys in the area Ortiz oversees – including Martinez – partner with the U.S. attorney and prosecute cases referred to them by task forces made up of local and federal law enforcement officials. Most are smaller cases, though some involve the state's top marijuana charge, trafficking over 100 pounds.

Ortiz said Martinez's office has been involved in additional efforts to disrupt cartel activity, including prosecuting other cartel-related crimes that have been committed in Doña Ana County such as homicides.

He said such cases could include instances in which "enforcers" – local gangs recruited by cartels to carry out punishment on this side of the border – kill someone for losing a drug shipment or money owed to a cartel. He said Martinez's office has "absolutely" prosecuted such cases.

"There may be somebody that is murdered or somebody that is kidnapped or beaten to death – things like that in retaliation for either losing a drug load or losing money that was supposed to go back to the organization," Ortiz said.

Not identifying cartel-related cases

Ortiz, like Martinez, would not identify specific cases that prove Martinez has taken on cartel members. Martinez's failure to do that for The New Mexican article prompted the state Democratic Party to accuse her of "exaggerating her record." A party news release stated that Martinez "can't" name cartel members she's taken on.

"New Mexicans are tired of the empty rhetoric, exaggerations and political double-speak from Susana Martinez," said the party's executive director, Scott Forrester. "Susana Martinez should come clean and admit that she's been exaggerating her record in order to create a tough-on-crime persona."

Ortiz and the Martinez campaign both said there's good reason Martinez won't name specific cases. The information agencies add to the shared intelligence database – including identities of cartel members – is confidential, both said.

Letting cartel members know that law enforcement knows a case is cartel related could help cartels identify informants and kill them and their families, Ortiz said. Martinez, through campaign spokesman Adam Deguire, said it could jeopardize ongoing cases. In addition, sometimes the safety of a police officer or prosecutor could be compromised if defendants in cases are publicly identified as cartel members, Ortiz said.

In response to the Democratic Party's attack, Deguire had harsh words for the Democrats' candidate for governor, [Diane Denish](#).

"There are numerous reasons law enforcement does not publicly highlight specific criminals as being members of particular cartels, and only someone truly ignorant of law enforcement operations, like Diane Denish, would be calling for the release of this specific intelligence to the public as part of a political campaign," he said.

"The fact that Diane Denish would even question that members of these cartels are operating in New Mexico's largest border county, and therefore running into law enforcement in a myriad of cases ranging from misdemeanors to violent felonies, demonstrates a stunning lack of understanding about the situation taking place along the border, and serves as further proof she should not receive a promotion to governor this fall," he said.

It's worth noting that Denish and her campaign haven't said anything publicly about Martinez's claim that she's taken on cartel members. There may only be a technical difference between Denish's campaign and the state Democratic Party, but it is a difference.

Cartel activity in New Mexico

Federal officials say cartels are operating in Southern New Mexico and specifically in Las Cruces. Even though there's no definition in state law that allows a case to officially be identified as cartel related, or even gang related, a [2007 report](#) to Congress on Mexico's drug cartels cited the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in stating that the Juárez Cartel has a presence in Southern New Mexico. The report also cited the 2007 National Drug Threat Assessment as saying there is a cartel presence in Las Cruces.

[NPR](#), citing "federal, state, and local law enforcement reporting" from 2006 to 2008, says there is cartel activity in Las Cruces, Deming, Columbus and Albuquerque. The [2009 HIDTA report](#) gives an example of a cartel-related murder committed in New Mexico:

"... in 2008 a teenage boy who had smuggled illicit drugs from Mexico into New Mexico on behalf of the Sinaloa Cartel was lured by another teenage boy into a remote area of New Mexico and shot to death on orders of the (drug trafficking organization) for which he worked; he allegedly owed the cartel money."

The report states that “many” drug trafficking organizations “also engage in other crimes, including alien smuggling, auto theft, kidnapping, murder, and weapons smuggling to further their criminal enterprises and generate illicit proceeds.” Some of that violence “has already spread into New Mexico,” the report states, giving another example:

“... in January 2009, members of a rival (drug trafficking organization) shot and killed a drug trafficker in a remote area of Silver City, New Mexico, for failure to pay a drug debt. The wife of another drug trafficker who owed a drug debt was also murdered; her body was discovered a week later near that same location.”

“Many of these violent traffickers obtain firearms by burglarizing businesses, private homes, and vehicles in the New Mexico HIDTA region,” the report states. Those are crimes that, if committed in Doña Ana County, would be prosecuted by Martinez’s office.

Las Cruces is also a hotbed for money laundering. According to the HIDTA report, there are more than 200 “financial institutions” located in Las Cruces. Many of them “operate from private residences, are uninsured, and are used solely for laundering drug proceeds.” But money laundering is a federal crime Martinez’s office has no jurisdiction to prosecute.

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