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Arizona Republic

September 23, 2013

Editorial

If immigration reform fails, more people die

By Editorial board

If you value human life, demand a change in our border policies.

Nearly 150 people have died along Arizona's border already this year. We'll surpass last year's numbers.

The annual border death count is as much a part of Arizona's summer as the achingly dry song of the cicadas.

This should cause moral outrage. But it doesn't. It's barely noticed beyond humanitarian groups.

This lack of general and sustained anger about the death toll is an outrage in itself. We are, after all, a nation that claims to care about human rights.

But this country's border-enforcement policies — coupled with the continuing lure of jobs and the drive to reunite with family members — are undeniably lethal.

Efforts to reform those policies in Congress are being declared dead or on life support, depending on who is assessing the odds. There are so many reasons to pass a comprehensive solution similar to what emerged in the Senate. Among those is the consequence of inaction.

“The evidence suggests an immigrant attempting to cross illegally into the United States today is eight times more likely to die in the attempt than approximately a decade ago,” according to **a report by the National Foundation for American Policy**, which analyzed Border Patrol data.

Fewer people are crossing, and proportionally, more people are dying.

That's a result of U.S. border policies that did not address the demand for migrant labor while systematically beefing up security in easy-to-cross places. Would-be laborers now travel rugged territory with criminal smugglers who routinely leave behind the sick or injured.

Dr. Gregory Hess, chief of the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, says the death count this calendar year is 148 people as of Monday. That's 23 more dead people than this time last year.

Since the beginning of 2001, Hess' office has received more than 2,200 bodies of people who tried and failed to cross Arizona's southern deserts. His office gets bodies from all border counties except Yuma County

The Border Patrol, which keeps track by fiscal year, reports 171 deaths statewide from Oct. 1, 2012, to Aug. 31. That's down 10 from the same time last fiscal year.

Hess says his office gets bodies the Border Patrol might know about, such as those found by hikers and reported directly to local sheriffs. Last year, his office received 157 bodies of border crossers.

"We will surpass that this year," he says.

Texas border counties are reporting increasing numbers of deaths of border crossers there as migration patterns shift in response to enforcement efforts in Arizona. Enforcement alone doesn't work. It kills.

The National Foundation for American Policy report says: "If another five years goes by without Congress approving new legal temporary visas for workers, it is predictable that an additional 2,000 people will die simply because they wanted to work in America."

Immigration reform is not about politics. It is about people.

It is about men, women and children who share our humanity. Their fragile hopes are like anybody else's. So is their tender love for families left behind or waiting somewhere on this side of the line.

Their deaths are bitter testimony to the failure of our current border policies.