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Desperate border migrants denied water by U.S. officials

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NCR Today

"Things are heating up here," the Rev. John Fife emailed me this week. Fife, along with twelve other Arizona activists, has been charged with littering for putting out life-saving gallon jugs of water along trails where migrants face death. This is urgent in June and July, when temperatures often hover well over 100 degrees.

Volunteers from three Tucson-based humanitarian groups--No More Deaths, Los Samaritanos and Humane Borders--were cited July 9 on the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, which extends 30 miles north of the Mexican border. Those charged included another minister and a Franciscan priest, Jerry Zawada.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officers issued the citations with assistance from officials from the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. They also confiscated the jugs, despite Fife's plea: "We urge you, we plead with you as citizens and responsible members of the United States government. Please don't take this water." The plea was painfully relevant: Two days earlier the body of a woman migrant was found in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge.

The thirteen activists chose the non-violent strategy of putting out water as an act of solidarity not only with immigrants in a lethal situation, but also with two of their fellow volunteers. In 2008 two activists were similarly charged. The two contested the charges. One man, Walt Staton, who was convicted in June, faces sentencing Aug. 11. He faces a potential one year in prison and \$100,000 fine.

The day after the littering citations, No More Deaths received a call from the office of Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Department of Interior, requesting a meeting. It took place in Washington DC on July 21st. Norma Price, MD, who attended the DC meeting, emailed me with her impressions.

"Six of us humanitarian workers met with Secretary Salazar and his staff regarding the issue of putting water on federal land to provide aid to migrants who are dying from dehydration and heat stroke as they cross the desert," wrote Price. "Secretary Salazar stated that 400 migrant deaths a year is far too many. He was very clear that he understands and is sympathetic with the plight of migrants crossing the desert to reach jobs to support their families. He also emphasized the necessity that we provide water and medical aid within the legal framework."

But, Price, explained, the requirements for refuge permits (to set out water for migrants) are so repressive that it is not possible to follow the stipulations.

"In addition to numerous requirements as to the logistics of water placement," Price wrote, "the permit applications require that the activity result in 'published peer reviewed research papers, dissertations, and publications or other scientific peer reviewed articles that illustrate the effectiveness, success or benefit of the method, technique, and practices that you propose to use,' according to the language of the permit application.

"We requested that the department devise a more reasonable permit application process which would allow water to be placed in areas of need and yet be consistent with the goals of Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. We asked Secretary Salazar to issue a directive that Humanitarian Aid is compatible with the mission of federal lands. We are waiting to hear back from his staff, and we are optimistic that we can work together with the federal authorities to prevent more deaths."

I have to wonder what kind of world we are living in. Border patrol law enforcement officials seal off most of Arizona's border with Mexico, leaving open only those areas that are nearly impossible to cross, including mountains and canyons. And that those charged with creating refuge for wildlife could be so indifferent to human life.

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