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U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire surveyed the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona over the weekend and met with ranchers who are struggling with the impact of illegal immigration.

Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, said Monday that he discussed visiting the area last year with his friend U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., after he took a trip along the border in 2007 that included part of her district. But Giffords was seriously wounded in a mass shooting during a public appearance she was making in Tucson in January and continues to rehabilitate in Houston.

At the invitation of Giffords' office, though, Altmire, fellow Pennsylvania U.S. Rep. Tim Holden, D-17, Schuylkill County, and U.S. Rep. John Barrow, D-Ga., made the trip west this past weekend.

On Saturday, the congressional trio went to a border patrol headquarters for the Tucson sector to see various surveillance techniques being used to track illegal immigrants and drug smugglers, including unmanned drones and infrared cameras.

Altmire said they then went to a "very isolated area" along the border on Sunday and saw a vehicle barrier that is easy to crawl over or around.

While border agents told him that their surveillance methods are working, Altmire said ranchers want a more visible presence from the border patrol. "They live with this every day," Altmire said.

One tragedy the ranchers continue to live with is the unsolved murder of another rancher in March 2010. Authorities suspect that 58-year-old Robert Krentz was shot by an illegal immigrant who then fled into Mexico in the same area where Altmire viewed the vehicle barrier.

Altmire said there is also a wildfire burning in the area that was set by an illegal immigrant

crossing through the rough terrain.

The congressional delegation then toured a border crossing in Douglas, a city of about 20,000 across the border from Agua Prieta and its population of 100,000. Altmire said they saw vehicle inspections and surveyed the control room and an apprehension area.

During conversations with border agents, Altmire said he learned that drug smugglers are using ultralight planes operated by a single person to glide silently across the border, drop up to 250 pounds of drugs and then return to Mexico.

The small aircraft don't appear on radar, and shooting them down and killing the operators is not an option, Altmire said. "They're basically unstoppable," he said.

While the planes are frequently spotted by border cameras and tracked, Mexican officials have not been willing to find those landing and arrest the pilots. "The Mexican government has been of no assistance in trying to figure this out," Altmire said.

Altmire said he also checked to ensure that American steel is being used to build the border fence and learned that different types of fencing might be necessary depending on the terrain and the needs of the border patrol. He also said he will support an extension to keep the National Guard on the border, an effort that is scheduled to end next month.

Altmire said he came back with the utmost respect for the border agents battling illegal immigration and drug smuggling on a daily basis. "They are literally the best that you can imagine," he said. "They are doing a magnificent job of trying to stay ahead of the curve."