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Slowing at Imperial Border

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MEDILL NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON—(July 12, 2005) Border watchers in Imperial County can finally blink, just a little. Border Patrol figures show the El Centro sector has seen a marked decrease in illegal traffic since last year, with more immigrants heading east to cross.

David Aguilar, chief of the U.S. Border Patrol, presented Congress with a map Tuesday showing the illegal immigration level along Mexico's border with California as yellow, compared to orange along the Texas border and red around Arizona and New Mexico.

No state got better than a yellow rating on the map. Red indicated the highest level of illegal traffic.

Overall, there has been a one percent increase in border apprehensions this fiscal year compared to the total through July of last year, Aguilar said in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

But the El Centro sector provides a bright spot for the Border Patrol in apprehension statistics. Arrests of illegals this year are down to 42,925 -- almost one third less than the 62,859 reported at this time in 2004.

The overall decrease can be attributed to many things, including the new camera system and a local shift in immigrant traffic toward Arizona, said Zach Welzein, a spokesman for the El Centro area.

"Attempted entries are also way down," he said.

Of greater political concern is a projected 131 percent increase this year in arrests of "other than Mexicans" (OTM's). National estimates show the Border Patrol has arrested 119,000 OTM's this year, compared to just 51,480 at the same time last year.

Discussion of security and immigration on Capitol Hill often centers on OTM's because lawmakers are concerned about the possibility of international terrorists entering the United States through the porous Mexican border.

OTM apprehensions in the El Centro sector parallel the national increase. In all of 2004, 769 OTM's were apprehended locally. With almost three months left in the government's 2005 fiscal year, Border Patrol has already arrested 736.

The vast majority of those are Central Americans, Welzein said. But in 2004, officials did arrest one Iraqi and one Afghan in the El Centro sector.

Aguilar said maintaining the current level of control and finishing the San Diego fence are priorities for the Border Patrol in Southern California.

Cooperation with law enforcement in Mexico has improved, he said, citing Mexicali as one of the Mexican cities with which Border Patrol has a good relationship. He declined to share details about specific operations with officials in Baja California.

Aguilar was called to testify on a day when the committee heard expert opinion from the former foreign ministers of Canada and Mexico, along with Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., whose immigration reform bill is awaiting a hearing in the Judiciary Committee, and Senator John Cornyn, R-Tex., who is expected to file a similar bill soon.

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