

Roll Call

BERSIN: TRAFFICKING AT BORDER WILL CONTINUE TO FALL

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Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin predicted Thursday that illegal immigration apprehensions in the highest-volume areas of the Southwest border will continue to decline in the coming year, a trend he said indicates that U.S. efforts are deterring illicit crossings.

Crackdowns in land ports, specifically El Paso and San Diego, which were once the busiest routes for trafficking between the United States and Mexico, have pushed illegal activity into the desert regions of Arizona. Corridors such as the dangerous, inhospitable Yuma sector have become the most active areas for illegal immigration and drug transportation in the United States, he said.

Bersin spoke at a border security forum sponsored by the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank.

But the Border Patrol has increased activity in the area, and has put out more surveillance technology, he said. Currently, Arizona is on track for 120,000 apprehensions this year — about half of last year's total, Bersin said. Next year, he said, CBP expects that number to drop below the 100,000 mark.

The effect of enforcement pushing traffickers to operate in increasingly remote areas, often compared to squeezing a balloon, has caused some in Congress to focus on reports of violent encounters between traffickers and law enforcement in lands that fall under federal protection due to environmental concerns. House GOP lawmakers have filed legislation, both in this session and the last, that would allow the Border Patrol unfettered access to those areas, eliminating the access restrictions imposed by the Interior Department.

But Bersin said his agency now works closely with environmental agencies, and has established arrangements that have fixed the access issues.

"This is really not a problem," he said. "While there have been congressional suggestions that the Border Patrol has been barred from some places, that is not the case."

Traditionally, falling border apprehension numbers are seen as marks of progress. Because the United States continues to deploy increased assets at the U.S.-Mexico line — there were around 3,000 border agents in the early 1990s, while the current total is more than 21,000 — the federal government follows the theory that fewer apprehensions means fewer people trying to cross. For years, CBP calculated that three people make it over the border for every one caught, but the agency has recently argued that the ratio is closer to two to one.

Bersin said Thursday that fencing, technology deployment and other initiatives have increased the intimidation factor for those thinking about crossing. Another factor in that deterrence, he said, is the elimination of the “voluntary return” policy at the Southern border, which allowed those apprehended to leave instead of facing removal proceedings.

With the exception of juveniles, unaccompanied minors and those requesting to stay in the United States for humanitarian reasons, all other apprehensions are subject to “consequence programs” that release them at a different point along the border or fly them deeper into Mexico, he said.

“The intent in each case . . . is to separate the migrant from the smuggler with which they were working,” he said, adding that due to increased enforcement, almost all illegal immigrants now rely on smugglers, who have become an industry that charges between \$2,000 and \$3,000 per attempt.

And while the depressed economy is actually helping the situation because there are fewer jobs that illegal immigrants could fill, the CBP director said enforcement is the prime reason for the declining numbers, not the slump.

“There’s a long term trend of decline that begins in 2000 in the United States and has continued since,” he said.

Doris Meissner, who headed the Immigration and Naturalization Service — which was folded into CBP in 2003 — under the Clinton administration and now serves as a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute, an advocacy group, said CBP needs a better way to communicate those findings with the U.S. public.

“The government has to do a better job of laying out the evidence,” she said.

Thus far, she said, the agency’s central statistic for discussing progress at the border has been apprehensions. But CBP now has an advanced identification system that allows it to track those caught at the border through fingerprints and other biometrics, and cameras and other equipment that can capture data on those who make it through. In some areas, the Border Patrol is close to knowing how many people are coming across, and in others it already has that ability, Meissner said, adding the agency needs to start using that information to discuss the results its resources are producing.

Bersin and Meissner addressed Republican criticism that the border is not secure. Bersin said that completely sealing it would require more of an investment than Americans are willing to make — including a Border Patrol with up to 500,000 officers. Both officials said comprehensive immigration overhaul is necessary to keep progress at the border going.

“We have more work to do on the Southwest border and we will have more to do until there is a legitimate labor market between the U.S. and Mexico, but measures by virtually any metric, the border is simply not what it used to be,” Bersin said.