

DEA Congressional Testimony
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**Statement of
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Drug Enforcement Administration
Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources**

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Executive Summary

The Southwest Border is the most prominent gateway for drugs into the United States. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is represented in the West Texas and New Mexico area by the El Paso Division, which covers approximately 40% of the U.S./Mexico Border.

DEA continues to support bi-national and international investigations and drug intelligence activities, implementing a policy of interagency teamwork at all levels of government.

The international bridges and the large transportation industry available in this area provide drug traffickers with innumerable drug and money smuggling opportunities. The desert-like areas in New Mexico and West Texas and easily crossed sections of the Rio Grande offer tremendous smuggling opportunities to drug trafficking organizations.

These drugs generally are destined for Kansas City, Chicago, Atlanta and/or New York.

Cocaine smuggling is our most serious regional threat. Marijuana is the most frequently and largest volume drug seized and transported through this border area. In north central New Mexico, we have seen the highest per capita heroin use in the United States.

The border is continually under attack by drug trafficking organizations that operate in Mexico. Mexican drug trafficking organizations utilize the El Paso ports of entry as their primary conduit into the U.S.

Traffickers use tractor/trailers, trucks, vans and cars, as well as commercial trains, aircraft, Federal Express, and airborne courier services to smuggle drugs into and through the area. Use of the passenger rail system to move contraband is significant.

A large volume of traffic crosses the border in this region, and major transportation projects are underway. The nearly complete La Entrada al Pacifico highway will connect three major east-west Interstates and save up to four shipping days between the Pacific Rim countries and Texas.

The El Paso Division participates in both the West Texas and New Mexico Regions of the Southwest Border High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area and coordinates its investigative technology efforts with the multi-agency, Special Operations Division, led by DEA.

Good morning, Chairman Souder, Vice Chairman Deal and Representative Reyes. I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), regarding the impact of the drug trade along the West Texas/New Mexico area of the Southwest Border. Mr. Chairman, before I begin, I want to thank you and the members of this Subcommittee for your support of the men and women of the Drug Enforcement Administration and our mission.



*Special Agent in Charge
El Paso Division
Sandalio Gonzalez*

Today, I will describe the trafficking challenges faced by our agency in the West Texas and New Mexico region. My remarks will reinforce the testimony you heard on March 10, 2003, in Tucson, Arizona, by DEA Assistant Special Agent in Charge James Woolley.

During this time of government reorganization and consolidation, DEA still serves only one mission, as the world's premier drug law enforcement agency. DEA's presence in the West Texas and New Mexico area continues to support bi-national and international investigations and drug intelligence activities. Our employees continue to implement the policy of interagency teamwork at all levels of government, which is the foundation of our longstanding tradition of cooperation.

The Region

The El Paso Division area of responsibility covers 54 counties in West Texas and New Mexico, comprising 778 miles, which is approximately 40% of the U.S./Mexico Border. The Division has 117 agents, who cover an area that includes 18 ports of entry, 6 of which are in New Mexico, in addition to an estimated minimum of 80 illegal crossing points. Some of these locations are over 100 miles from our offices.

This area of the Southwest is unique because of our location on the U.S./Mexico border. El Paso and its sister city, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, comprise the largest metropolitan area on the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Nearly 2 million people inhabit the El Paso/Juarez borderplex. Over 1.2 million people reside in Juarez. Daily, over 100,000 people cross the ports-of-entry into El Paso.

The introduction of NAFTA had a major impact on the El Paso/Juarez area. The people crossing the international bridges on a daily basis and the large transportation industry available in this area (air, bus, trucking and rail) provide drug traffickers with innumerable drug and money smuggling opportunities. Rural, desert-like areas in New Mexico and West Texas, whether they be large ranches or National Park land backing up to the border, or some easily crossed places along the Rio Grande offer tremendous smuggling opportunities to drug trafficking organizations.



Rio Grande River near El Paso

Drugs Trafficked

Cocaine smuggling is our most serious threat, with prices running from \$15,000 to \$16,500 per kilogram. Marijuana can be purchased for between \$400 and \$500, per kilogram, and is the most frequently and largest volume drug seized and transported through our area. In New Mexico, the large areas of uninhabited land provide excellent locations for marijuana plantations. Drug task forces conduct "fly-overs" to detect large marijuana fields. Heroin and dangerous drugs, primarily methamphetamine, are seen in smaller amounts except in northern New Mexico where mountainous and rural areas offer tremendous opportunities for small laboratories. The El Paso Mobile Enforcement Team has conducted two deployments in as many years in Santa Fe and Rio Arriba counties in north central New Mexico. Heroin use, there, was the highest per capita in the United States. Efforts toward prevention, rehabilitation and enforcement have not turned the tide against heroin abuse in these areas.

Drug Trafficking Organizations and Routes

The border is continually under attack by drug trafficking organizations that operate in Mexico. Three major Mexican drug trafficking organizations are responsible for smuggling illegal drugs across the West Texas and New Mexico area of the Southwest Border. Although these organizations are in agreement to work together without trying to control each other, recently one of the leaders has been consolidating his power, to demonstrate that he is still in charge of the El Paso/Juarez corridor. His methods include violence and executions of smaller organizations that do not pay his "fees" to move their drug shipments through "his" corridor. For example, in the last eight years, there have been 325 drug-related executions in this corridor. The majority of the victims were either members of small rival organizations, informants, or those responsible for losing drug loads. This trafficker also controls drug operations in the Mexican States of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Sonora, and Nuevo Leon.



Before the World Trade Center disaster in September of 2001, an estimated 90% of the illegal drugs coming to the U.S. were smuggled through the international ports of entry. Since that time, tight security measures have caused smugglers to use less conspicuous points of entry. Some areas of the Rio Grande offer no physical barriers to prevent the illegal entry of drugs or aliens into the United States.

We have identified three major drug trafficking corridors in West Texas and New Mexico. They are the Deming/Backdoor Corridor, the Ciudad Juarez/Las Cruces Corridor, and the Presidio/Big Bend Corridor, which will be used extensively with the completion of the four-lane "La Entrada al Pacifico" highway in early 2004. Mexican drug trafficking organizations utilize the El Paso ports of entry as their primary conduit into the U.S.

DEA investigations in this area indicate that illegal drugs being transshipped from Mexico through the West Texas/New Mexico area usually are destined for Kansas City, Chicago, Atlanta and/or New York. Our Division continues to conduct multi-jurisdictional investigations with other offices and agencies throughout the United States.

EL PASO-THE PRINCIPAL THREAT



El Paso/Ciudad Juarez represents one of the most heavily used drug smuggling corridors on the Southwest Border.



Drug Smuggling Methods

We have seen traffickers use concealed compartments in tractor/trailers, trucks, vans and cars. They also use commercial trains, aircraft, Federal Express, and airborne courier services to smuggle drugs into and through our area. In more remote areas, such as the Big Bend National Park, drugs are moved across the Rio-Grande in small boats, vehicles that can drive across the river when it is very low, or even by horseback.

In New Mexico the 180-mile border with Mexico is mostly unguarded and, for the most part, demarcated only by a barbed wire fence. Backpackers carrying loads of contraband, vehicles circumventing the ports of entry, and clandestine aircraft making low-altitude flights easily penetrate it. Three Interstate highways (I-10, I-25 and I-40), numerous other highways, state routes and country roads provide more than adequate corridors for transportation. Passenger trains make daily stops in Lordsburg, in the "boot heel" area of southwestern New Mexico, as well as in Albuquerque, the state's largest city.



El Paso Field Division Area of Responsibility

Use of the passenger rail system to move contraband is significant. Many substantial seizures have been made from passenger trains in the last year. In one instance, federal authorities seized \$500,000 in cash from a passenger on a westbound train in New Mexico. Freight cars also can be utilized for drug shipments, either by concealing the contraband in cargo or building false compartments in the cars themselves.

Transportation Factors

A large volume of traffic crosses our border every day, and major transportation projects are underway. Since the formation of NAFTA, commercial truck crossings from Mexico into West Texas and New Mexico have risen 11.7%, from 666,225 trucks in 1999 to 744,407 in 2002. Pedestrian traffic has risen 55%, from 6.2 million in 1999 to 9.6 million in 2002. A reduction in the amount of private vehicle traffic was seen in 2002, due to heightened security after September 11, 2001. However, 15.3 million vehicles still crossed our borders in 2002. During a normal day, a vehicle can wait up to one hour to cross the border. During periods of heightened security each private vehicle is inspected.

In the Big Bend/Marfa region, there is only one official port of entry, which is located in the small town of Presidio, Texas. The Mexican Government is building the four-lane La Entrada al Pacifico highway, which is approximately 95% complete. This highway will serve as a northeast/southwest trade route from the port city of Topolobampo, Sinaloa, Mexico, through Presidio, intersecting three major east-west Interstates, I-10, I-20, and I-40. It is estimated that as much as 30% of the truck traffic will be diverted from California and El Paso ports of entry to Presidio. This highway begins at a deep-water Pacific Ocean port that is over 500 miles closer and much less congested than the Port of Los Angeles. This completed route will save up to four shipping days for goods moving between the Pacific Rim countries and Texas.

Additionally, the South Orient Railroad (purchased by the State of Texas in 2001), was leased for 40 years to Nuevo Grupo, Mexico, and in the near future, is expected to provide both daily

passenger train and freight service between Mexico and the United States. We expect both the La Entrada al Pacifico highway and this rail transport to bring drug smuggling issues to the Big Bend/Marfa area that will challenge DEA in the region.

DEA's intelligence and operations experience shows that drug traffickers have used various normal transportation methods to ship their drugs into the United States. As we put more and more pressure on drug trafficking operations through our multi-agency efforts, the traffickers will be forced to resort to even greater attempts at smuggling their drugs through vulnerable or susceptible shipment venues.

In our consideration of methods to "fast-track" commerce, we must continue to develop operations and systems which will maximize our ability to interdict dangerous drugs and guard against corruption of the processes. The fact that we will be experiencing a greatly increased volume of activity on the U.S./Mexican border emphasizes the importance of making every effort to reduce the flow of illegal drugs into our country.

Interagency Cooperation

DEA is an investigative agency, not an interdiction agency. The sharing of information with other law enforcement agencies is the only way that we can effectively combat illegal narcotics. However, we are not alone in our efforts.

The El Paso Division currently participates in both the West Texas and New Mexico Regions of the Southwest Border High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), which include several other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. We work closely with these agencies, and through this collaborative effort, we are able to conduct investigations that are regional, national and international in scope.

I also must mention that DEA responds to U. S. Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (BCBP) checkpoint seizures and arrests. (BCBP is an interdiction agency.) These referrals include not only drugs seized as a result of checkpoint inspections of vehicles, but also abandoned drugs. DEA has agents in three separate offices, in two states, dedicated to responding to seizures made at BCBP checkpoints, some of which are over 100 miles away. DEA agents responding to abandoned drug referrals can spend anywhere from 14 to 48 hours processing the drugs, while checkpoint seizures and arrests are more labor intensive and time consuming.

Handling these types of cases takes an average of 110 hours each. For example, in fiscal year 2002, DEA agents in our area responded to 467 abandoned drug referrals and 469 checkpoint drug seizures, which consumed 59% of our agents' time. Increased security will continue to increase the number of drug seizures and arrests.

Money Laundering

The smuggling of bulk currency into Mexico continues to be one of the favored methods of the drug trafficking organizations. On a daily basis, approximately 45,000 vehicles cross the border into Mexico, virtually unchecked by U.S. law enforcement. Southbound bulk currency shipments range from \$20,000 up to \$10 million; the larger shipments are usually concealed in tractor-trailers. Smaller amounts are usually crossed in passenger vehicles and hidden in every conceivable way. The use of legitimate financial institutions on both sides of the border continues to be a favored method used by the drug



trafficking organizations. Wire transfers and corresponding bank accounts between the U.S. and Mexican banks are an integral part of this system. The El Paso/Juarez area receives thousands of money wire transfers, monthly, originating from other areas of the country that have large Hispanic populations. In order to address this problem, the El Paso Division leads the multi-agency HIDTA "Enterprise" money laundering initiative, which was established at DEA's request in late 2002.

Intelligence Operations

DEA utilizes the services of the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) and the databases from its 15 participating Federal agencies, which serve as a valuable resource of information. The Division liaisons with EPIC on a regular basis, and we use their Special Operations and Southwest Border Units to augment our investigations.

DEA also actively participates in the West Texas and New Mexico Regional HIDTA Investigative Support Centers, one of which is collocated in the El Paso Federal Justice Center that houses both the DEA and FBI Offices. Numerous federal, state and local law enforcement agencies participate and share information in a collective effort, which includes deconfliction of enforcement operations in this area.

In this age of ever changing technology, the DEA El Paso Division coordinates its investigative technology efforts with the multi-agency, Special Operations Division, led by DEA. This office is designed specifically to coordinate multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional, and multi-national investigations against the command and control elements of major drug trafficking organizations, operating domestically and abroad.

Conclusion

The Southwest Border is the most prominent gateway for illegal drugs into the United States. I have attempted to provide you with a picture of the situation that DEA is facing in the West Texas and New Mexico area. Increased private and commercial vehicle and pedestrian border crossings, together with the presence of hardened Mexican drug trafficking organizations, will require DEA's continuing vigilance and on-going cooperation among law enforcement entities in this region. The El Paso Division is focused on this challenge.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today. I will be happy to answer any questions that you or other members may have.