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Barriers have failed before

Lessons learned: Attempts to secure parts of the border have only pushed illegal crossings into perilously remote regions

By Brady McCombs

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History offers little hope for a nation attempting to seal its southern border.

The government slowed illegal crossings to a trickle in targeted areas of El Paso and San Diego. So illegal entrants shifted their routes to Arizona and New Mexico. Now they're shifting back.

Whatever officials have tried, the flow of illegal immigration has not stopped. Not even close.

No matter the operation, the number of agents, the type of technology or the size of fences, illegal entrants have made their way under, through and around the nation's blanket of security.

And there's little reason to expect a different outcome this time, a Star investigation found.

The last decade in San Diego offers a case study in the difficulties of securing the border.

In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. Border Patrol successfully slowed illegal immigration with an influx of agents and technology along a 14-mile fenced stretch of border.

Traffic continued, though, and illegal entrants crossed elsewhere along the border. Now, they're coming back to San Diego.

"Imagine the border as a big, long, skinny balloon. When you squeeze in one part, it comes out in another," says T.J. Bonner, president of the National Border Patrol Council, the agency's union. "It doesn't disappear."

Apprehensions along the southern border have continued at the same level in the past decade despite twice as many agents and an agency budget that has more than doubled. In 1995, agents made nearly 1.3 million apprehensions across the southern border. In 2005, they made nearly 1.2 million.

Illegal entrants will find the border's weak spots until the agency has enough agents, technology, fencing and vehicle barriers, says Border Patrol spokesman Xavier Rios. "We've got thousands and

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360 Panoramas

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thousands of miles of border," he says. "We've been understaffed and under-resourced for decades."

The agency concedes it may not be able to catch every illegal entrant. Its goal is operational control, which spokesman Mario Martinez defines as "an area on the border that we can say we are able to, with high probability, detect, respond and interdict border penetration."

In 2004, the agency claimed operational control in parts of the San Diego, El Paso and Rio Grande Valley sectors. It still has it in parts of the sectors, but officials won't say exactly where for security reasons.

Another key factor is finding and deporting illegal immigrants working in the United States, Rios says.

"Border enforcement is only part of the solution," he says. "It is not the solution."

Past enforcement efforts

A billboard meant to lure visitors to Tijuana Beach casts a shadow on the corrugated-steel fence marking the border in a canyon east of the Pacific Ocean.

The words loom large: *"Conoce a tus vecinos,"* or "Get to know your neighbors." In the billboard's background, a man sits on the beach, gazing at leaping dolphins.

The Mexican advertisement's utopian worldview is a stark contrast to one of the most hardened parts of the border below.

The message from the north is clear: Keep out.

A 14-mile fence runs from the Pacific to Otay Mountain. It's backed by surveillance cameras on 45-foot-high poles, stadium lights and seismic ground sensors. For nine miles, there is a secondary 15-foot steel mesh fence whose final five miles are to be built this year.

When the Border Patrol built the secondary fence, sent more agents and added technology in the mid-'90s as part of Operation Gatekeeper, apprehensions fell from 1,200 a day in 1995 to a low point of about 300 a day in 2001.

In 1994, the sector accounted for nearly half the apprehensions on the southern border. Groups of hundreds of illegal entrants would run through the San Ysidro Port of Entry and smaller groups crossed all along the hills east and west of the city. Yellow signs on highways near the border still warn motorists to watch for families in the road.

In 1993, the 14-mile stretch to Otay Mountain accounted for about 95 percent of the sector's apprehensions, says James Jacques, a spokesman for the San Diego Sector. In 2006, this section accounts for 28 percent.

Yet, illegal crossings continue. This year, in fact, the sector once again is the second-busiest on the border, with nearly 400 apprehensions per day.

Some go through the canyon below the billboard — *el Cañón de la Cabra,* or Goat Canyon — about 1 1/2 miles from the Pacific. Here, the fence stops for a few hundred feet as it climbs the steep canyon wall to the west. The ground beneath it eroded, causing the barrier to fall.

The thick greenery on the riverbed at the canyon floor offers ideal hiding spots. A Mexican highway sits just 50 feet from the fence.

On a warm July evening, three men carry bags back and forth to the edge of the fence near a pipe on the Mexican side in an apparent drug-smuggling operation. In two hours, only one Border Patrol vehicle drives by. It doesn't stop.

The men finally disappear. They might have crossed in the sewage pipes. They might have left drugs for a later pickup. They weren't apprehended.

Even hardened sections of the border have soft spots.

what it's like living on the dividing line.

View panoramas

"As long as they keep trying, they are going to find a way to get here," says Christopher Bauder, president of National Border Patrol Council in San Diego. "They are going to stay a half-step ahead of us and find new ways to get across the border."

Shifting traffic

The crackdown on illegal crossings began more than a decade ago with the birth of a new strategy.

In 1993, Operation Hold the Line put 400 agents on a 25-mile stretch in El Paso to form a visible line of patrol. Apprehensions fell 72 percent in one year, says Doug Mosier, an El Paso Sector spokesman.

Bouyed by that success, the Border Patrol implemented its Southwest Border Strategy in 1994, devoting its resources to stopping illegal entry in the heavily populated area of San Diego as well as El Paso in hopes the harsh desert terrain in Arizona, the mountains in eastern California and the Rio Grande in Texas would serve as natural deterrents.

Officials miscalculated. After Gatekeeper and Hold the Line, traffic moved to eastern California and to Arizona. Smugglers found success in the expansive desert.

Entrants now risk their lives walking for days through the mountains and deserts in eastern California, Arizona and New Mexico. They also cross the Rio Grande.

Since 1998, the Tucson Sector has been the busiest — and deadliest — on the border. It's accounted for nearly 37 percent of apprehensions on the southern border with less than a week left in fiscal 2006. More than 130 illegal entrants have died yearly since 2002 in the Tucson Sector. Borderwide, known deaths rose 78 percent, from 266 in 1998 to 473 in 2005.

About 500,000 illegal entrants have arrived annually since 1995, with nearly 12 million total now in the country, estimates the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research group.

"We are just displacing the traffic to less urban areas where it is not as visible," says Shawn Moran, a Border Patrol agent in the San Diego Sector.

It's always visible to somebody, though. With helicopters buzzing overhead and vehicles racing down the highway after illegal entrants, Sasabe, 70 miles southwest of Tucson, resembled an action-movie set when the Altar Valley was the nation's busiest corridor for illegal entrant traffic, says Heriberto Rubalcara, who lives a few hundred feet from the border.

Sasabe has quieted in the past year and a half, he says. The number of agents in the Tucson Sector rose from 1,600 in 2002 to 2,400 today, and the agency put up vehicle barriers west of the port of entry.

"It's good. Now I can sleep well," Rubalcara says in Spanish. "They are patrolling and you don't have to worry about something bad happening."

Traffic has begun to move east to New Mexico and El Paso and west to Yuma and San Diego, again, since the Border Patrol efforts began targeting Tucson.

San Diego and El Paso now are the second- and third-busiest sectors this fiscal year for apprehensions, albeit with less traffic than in the mid-1990s, the Border Patrol says.

As traffic begins trickling back to San Diego, the area has better fences and more technology to stop it, but fewer agents. San Diego now has 1,600 agents, down from 2,500 in 1997-98, Moran says. In 1997, the agency would put 45 to 50 agents on a 5 1/2-mile stretch from the San Ysidro Port of Entry to the Pacific Ocean. Today, fewer than 12 agents patrol it.

More agents needed

Nearly five miles of corrugated-steel fence line the border east of San Diego near Campo.

On a July evening at sunset, no agent is visible for miles. A group of illegal entrants scales the fence and blurs into

the vegetation, running north.

It illustrates that fences, cameras and sensors do little without agents to monitor them, says Wayne Cornelius, head of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California-San Diego.

"If there are penetrations detected and you don't have boots on the ground to pursue and apprehend, it's just another symbolic show of force," Cornelius says.

The Border Patrol has 12,000 agents, with 10,500 on the southern border. A U.S. Senate proposal debated this summer would add 14,000 in five years, bringing the total to about 28,000. That's still not enough, experts say.

"That would require a level of manpower much more than anything that has been discussed so far," Cornelius says.

San Diego had 38 agents per mile across the 66-mile sector in 1998 during Operation Gatekeeper. El Paso had 16 agents per mile on a 25-mile stretch during Operation Hold the Line. Both slowed illegal entry.

To patrol the entire border as El Paso did, it would take 32,000 agents — and that's with all of them working all day every day. To achieve that coverage within the realities of regular work days, shift changes and administrative duties, it would take 100,000 agents, Cornelius says.

Using the same formula, it would take more than 225,000 to match San Diego's coverage.

Recruiting, hiring and retaining that many agents could be a tall task for an agency already struggling to maintain ranks.

Where fences fit in

Fences have been key in past enforcement efforts, and they should be in the future, too, says Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif.

Fences in San Luis have allowed agents in the Yuma Sector to focus on areas east and west of the city, says Tyler Emblem, a Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue agent. They delay and deter illegal entrants in El Paso, Border Patrol spokesman Patrick Berry says.

A fence would be a major improvement at the border west of Columbus, N.M., where James Johnson owns a 3,000-acre farm. Illegal entrants drive through his property, trample his crops and drink his water, which he says gives him a better understanding of the issue than politicians such as Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano.

"You know, Governor Napolitano said: 'Show me a 50-foot fence and I'll show you a 51-foot ladder.' My response: 'Let's make 'em get a ladder and slow them down a little bit,'" he says.

But fences don't stop people, people stop people — that's the stance of the National Border Patrol Council. Standing in downtown San Ysidro in front of double fencing, agent Moran scoffs at the notion that the fence has stopped traffic:

"No one in the Border Patrol that actually works in the field thinks the fence is the answer to anything. The fence is really just a speed bump. They get over it in about 20 seconds."

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