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## Ranchers confront surge in entrants

**Break-ins, litter, bodies are daily realities in Altar Valley**

**By Michael Marizco**  
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ALTAR VALLEY - Roy Isaman has arrived at a dubious distinction: His Southern Arizona ranch sits on the busiest crossing point for illegal entrants from Mexico.

El Mirador Ranch borders Sasabe, Sonora, southwest of Tucson, and at times you don't know if you're looking at Mexico or standing in it. Whole sections of the barbed-wire fence that separates his ranch from the smuggler haven across the way are missing, trampled or lying in large curls on the ground - cut by smugglers trying to avoid Arizona Highway 286.

Ask him why he doesn't fix the fence and he looks surprised for a moment, then says, "I don't even worry about the Mexican fence. I have enough problems with the rest of the fence."

The human flood pouring through his land and all along the border prompted the governor to declare an emergency on Aug. 15, freeing up \$1.5 million of state funds in a bid to help. But how the state will spend those funds is still unclear.

Ranchers along this stretch of the U.S.-Mexican border face the heaviest amount of foot traffic because illegal entrants and drug smugglers have been chased away from Cochise County and the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation this year. A concentration of U.S. Border Patrol agents in those areas moved border crossers into the Altar Valley, where these ranchers now deal with them. The agency's Tucson station, which covers much of this area, has had a sharp rise in apprehensions up to 60 percent from last year.

Thirty-five miles up the highway from Isaman, third-generation rancher John King keeps a jaundiced eye on the slashed fences and his smashed-up well, the result of thirsty illegal border crossers trying to get water out of the closed system.

The nation's top homeland security official, Michael Chertoff, reported that a plan was already in the works to bring Arizona's border under control even before Gov. Janet Napolitano declared Arizona's border with Mexico an emergency.

You couldn't tell there was a plan on a recent Sunday afternoon, though, in the vicinity of Solano Canyon, which drops down from the Baboquivari Mountains onto King's ranch. The garbage in the creek is typical of areas heavily used by illegal entrants: backpacks, discarded clothes, water bottles, empty cans and packages of food that presumably belonged to people who hope one day for jobs somewhere in the United States.

Nor could you tell the afternoon before, when a cowboy, Jason Cathcart, found the skeletal remains of two people in a wash five miles west on the dirt road from King's house.

For Cathcart, that makes four corpses he's encountered this summer alone.

Two weeks ago, he came home to find somebody had smashed a window at his home and stolen food and clothes, a Pima County Sheriff's Department report shows. He smiled when he likened the event to the much publicized break-in at U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe's home near Nogales, Ariz., last month.

"Tell him I know exactly what he's going through," he says.

Law-enforcement officials don't keep track of border-related crime in Southern Arizona, but the anecdotes don't stop.

Sheriff's Deputy Allen Williams informally tracks them by the calls he receives in the Altar Valley. On Tuesday he had three calls, only one of which didn't involve the border. One was a migrant smuggler with 14 people. In a second, he chased down a truck through the desert carrying 500 pounds of marijuana at 5:30 a.m. The driver got away.

"Most of the people are pretty well fed up with it and wish the federal government would take action and close the border," Williams said.

That's not likely to happen soon, but homeland security chief Chertoff said the department is working on a plan, according to a New York Times report earlier this week.

Arizona also is acting, emulating a New Mexico strategy in declaring an emergency, citing stolen cars and property crime along the border as the reason.

The question for individual property owners is whether any of the \$1.5 million in emergency funds will be spent on helping them recuperate from some of the damages they've experienced.

That's not likely because private-property owners such as the Kings or the Isamans aren't eligible, by statute, for the money, which will go only to political subdivisions, said Cam Hunter, spokeswoman for the state's Office of Homeland Security.

Right now, counties and communities are looking at how to apply for their share of the money, she said. So far, the only declared allocation of the emergency funds has been to place 13 state officers in Nogales, Bisbee and San Luis for 30 days to counter car theft, she said.

Electronic surveillance of areas under threat from illegal entry are being considered but no facilities have been selected, Hunter said.

She expects the process for deciding how to spend the money will go slowly.

"It's not as straightforward as what we do in a flood or what we do in a fire because we haven't done it before," Hunter said.

Meanwhile, Jon Rowley fiddles with a broken water spout at his Arivaca cattle ranch, the result of what he calls "wanton migration" into the United States.

Last year, he had to test his bulls for bovine trichomoniasis, when his neighbors encountered it in their own herd. The cut fences meant his own herd was susceptible to "trich."

Peggy, his wife, looks at the glorious, green rolling pasture around their home the way a New Yorker would look at Central Park - beautiful, but best not to jog alone because something might happen.

"I don't want to run into large groups of people by myself," she said. "It's scary."

They're not really interested in recouping losses from the state's emergency fund, Jon Rowley said.

"It's such an insignificant amount; it's best not spent until a serious plan is devised," he said.

Down the road in Sasabe, Sonora, an equally unimpressed Saúl Hernandez negotiates with a group of three nervous Mexican men.

Hernandez told them to wait until more people arrived. "I'll get you across, but I want more people."

The 26-year-old smuggler is proud of the silver Ford F-250 he was able to buy this year with smuggling dollars.

Lightning cracks in the darkening sky moving south from Tucson as he smokes his cigarette.

"I don't give a damn what they do," he says. "They're not going to close me off the border."

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