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## Checkpoint ban questioned

*Report: Impact of Border Patrol's roving sites at issue*

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The Border Patrol's effectiveness along most of Arizona's border with Mexico may be suffering because of a congressional ban on permanent checkpoints in the Tucson Sector, a federal agency reported Friday.

The sector, stretching across 261 miles of border, is the nation's main corridor for undocumented immigrants to cross into the United States.

It is the only one of nine Border Patrol sectors in the Southwest forced to rely only on roving checkpoints.

The report by the Government Accountability Office said that by one measure, the effectiveness of checkpoints in the Tucson Sector had fallen by 77 percent since fiscal 2001, when rules went into effect that a checkpoint had to be moved at least once a week.

The report was interpreted in opposite ways.

The Department of Homeland Security said the study supported its view that permanent checkpoints are needed in all sectors.

But U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe, the Tucson Republican mainly responsible for the congressional ban, cited portions of the report that he said showed the superiority of mobile traffic stops.

The 11-term congressman has long argued that the flexibility and surprise provided by portable roadblocks make them more effective than fixed installations.

At Kolbe's urging, congressional appropriations bills since 1999 have prohibited building permanent stops in the Tucson Sector. Current rules require moving a checkpoint after no more than two weeks, on average.

The agency spends much time and effort setting up and disassembling the other checkpoints, the study showed.

The eight other Southwestern sectors have 33 permanent checkpoints, most supplemented by mobile traffic stops set up on back roads.

The nine-month study by the GAO was requested by the House Committee on Homeland Security in an attempt to measure the effectiveness not only of stopping immigrants but preventing smuggling and securing the border against terrorists.

"The data suggest that the performance of the Tucson Sector interior checkpoints dropped starting in (fiscal) 2002, and more in (fiscal) 2003, after the Border Patrol began relocating or closing them on a regular basis," the study said.

Three other sectors that did not have to relocate or close checkpoints experienced no comparable decrease, the GAO said.

The study said other factors could account for the changes, but figures were not available to quantify them.

In a statement, Kolbe said he "welcomed" the report and argued that overall, it backed his assertion that checkpoints are inefficient because "everyone knows where (they) are, and they simply avoid them."

"After more than 10 years, the Border Patrol still cannot provide evidence that permanent checkpoints are needed in the Tucson Sector," he said.

Kolbe said the report showed that although the Border Patrol complained that frequent moves had reduced its effectiveness, the agency "did not have a data-based analysis to support these statements."

The GAO suggested that Congress ask the Border Patrol to compile broader data before deciding whether to keep, loosen or end the ban on a permanent station.

The study listed numerous advantages and drawbacks to both systems and concluded that the two methods are complementary.

David Aguilar, former head of the Tucson Sector and now the Border Patrol's national chief, has said that lack of permanent checkpoints has hampered agents, and a combination of permanent and temporary checkpoints would be ideal.

At a Senate hearing in April, Aguilar testified that permanent checkpoints would give agents "the proper equipment to do the job."

Officials in the Tucson Sector had no comment on the report.

The sector's size, coupled with a crackdown on immigration in areas of California and Texas, has made the area the main route for undocumented border crossers.

The Tucson Sector had more than twice as many apprehensions, nearly 492,000, as any other sector in the fiscal year that ended last September. Many of the arrests were not made at checkpoints.

One complaint by Border Patrol agents was that because immigrants knew a checkpoint would move every week, they would cross the border when the checkpoint was 25 miles away, wait just south of it, and continue their journey after the checkpoint was moved to within 15 miles of the border.

Kolbe said that in the past year, the sector had effectively bypassed the requirement for moving its main checkpoint. The stop remains in the same place by following a cycle of operating for 14 days, closing for eight hours, then reopening.

Checkpoints are set up on major highways and secondary roads 25 to 75 miles inland from the border.

Permanent stations typically have large, tollboothlike structures, kennel facilities, wide bays for searching vehicles, and X-ray or other equipment to inspect trucks.

The Border Patrol is part of U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency, which in turn is under the Department of Homeland Security.

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