

500 more agents on the way to border

Initiative is announced as season of death nears

By Michael Marizco
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The U.S. Border Patrol will put an additional 500 agents on the Arizona border as part of its latest presummer initiative, agency officials confirmed Tuesday.

The Arizona Border Control Initiative Phase II is the third annual Border Patrol program designed to increase the number of agents in the Tucson Sector as the Arizona desert begins to heat up, illegal-border-crosser apprehension rates begin to increase and migrants begin to die.

Last year, an Arizona Daily Star compilation of Mexican consulate and Arizona county medical examiner records documented 191 illegal-entrant deaths in the Tucson Sector, from Oct. 1, 2003, to Sept. 30, 2004. Agents in the Tucson Sector apprehended about 491,000 people in the same time period.

Some of the new agents will be assigned as Border Patrol Search Trauma and Rescue agents; still more will be brought in throughout the summer on permanent assignment, said national Border Patrol spokesman Mario Villarreal. He declined to give further details, saying more information would come at an announcement today in Tucson.

The Associated Press reported Tuesday that about 155 agents will be introduced to Arizona immediately and another 370 will be permanently assigned throughout the year. Two hundred more will be brought in this summer as temporary agents, to bolster the force of 2,170 agents assigned to the Tucson Sector, according to the AP.

"Five hundred additional agents is a very substantial infusion," said the Migration Policy Institute's Doris Meissner, who headed the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the Clinton administration. But agents are only one step toward securing the border, she said.

"Our experience was that you needed a range of things, not only enforcement," she said. "Agents are crucial but they're only a support element."

Border activists say the timing of the initiative is curious, coming just days before the Minuteman Project begins its monthlong "political assembly" along the banks of the San Pedro River southeast of Tucson. The volunteer effort is to begin Friday, and organizers say it will serve to demonstrate against the government's inaction in sealing the border.

The additional agents will bring the number in the Tucson Sector close to the ideal target number of 2,700, said Joe N. Dassaro, president of the San Diego sector's union, Local 1613. Nationally, the Border Patrol has about 10,000 agents, but the Tucson Sector accounts for about 51 percent of all arrests with only one-quarter of the agents.

Last year, the agency spent \$15 million on the Arizona Border Control Initiative and an additional \$13 million to fly

By the numbers

- A look at Tucson Sector numbers from fiscal year 2004.

2,170

Agents

491,000

Apprehensions

191

Deaths*

*Daily Star tally

NewsTalk

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detainees back to Mexico.

The program brought 200 new agents to Arizona. It also brought in new helicopters and added detention space.

Kristi Clemens, a Customs and Border Protection spokeswoman, told MSNBC News that the new initiative will "strengthen and improve" border protection procedures put in place last year. She called last year's program a great success.

The Rev. Robin Hoover, president of Tucson-based Humane Borders, a group that puts barrels of water out in the desert for illegal entrants, isn't so sure.

While apprehensions increased over 2003, the higher arrest numbers don't give an accurate measure of success or failure, Hoover said. Besides, numbers can also be manipulated politically, he said.

As a result, he remains skeptical about the Border Patrol's analysis and wonders what will be different in this year's version of the border crackdown.

The Tucson Sector's union, Local 2544, looks at the influx of agents as a shell game, said spokesman Mike Albon.

"The Tucson Sector needs all the help it can get. But this leaves holes where those other agents are taken from," he said.

Activists point to today's announcement as a measure of success from the Minuteman Project.

"It seems that the additional public attention has had the results those involved down here were hoping it would have," said Glenn Spencer, president of American Border Patrol, the Hereford-based group that uses technology to monitor illegal border crossings and uploads the results to its Web site.

"The question is whether it will do any good," he said.

Tucson Sector spokesman Andy Adame said the Minuteman Project had nothing to do with the new initiative. Pointing out that last year's initiative started in mid-March, he said, "I think once you hear what the commissioner says . . . you'll see there's no way you can rush an initiative like this."

• *The Associated Press contributed to this article. Contact reporter Michael Marizco at 573-4213 or at mmarizco@azstarnet.com.*

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