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A big year for border security

As issues gain attention, U.S. uses myriad ways to stem entrant tide

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Call it cause and effect.

With border-security attention riveted in Arizona during 2007 on the issues of illegal immigration, drug smuggling and potential terrorist infiltration, federal authorities responded with a spree of fence building and high-tech surveillance.

The construction included both old-fashioned fences and the new high-tech virtual variety, plus vehicle barriers and remote-controlled aircraft equipped with eyes in the sky.

And there are signs that the buildup is having an impact, particularly in far Southwestern Arizona.

In the Border Patrol's Yuma Sector, which roughly covers Arizona's westernmost 110 miles of border, apprehensions of illegal entrants plunged dramatically. They were down about 68 percent during fiscal 2007 compared with the previous year — from more than 118,000 to about 38,000.

By comparison, totals in the Tucson Sector for the fiscal year, which ended on Sept. 30, dipped by about 4 percent to 378,000 from 392,000.

Border Patrol spokesman Jose Gonzalez said that in the Tucson Sector, covering the rest of the state's southern border, marijuana seizures soared by 46 percent. He said the dipping numbers of arrests show that fewer migrants are crossing, and agents are able to spend more time on smuggling operations.

The year began and ended with decisions by the nation's Homeland Security Department chief to waive environmental laws, enabling prompt construction of steel barricades along parts of the Arizona-Mexico border.

In January, Secretary Michael Chertoff's waiver of a series of laws — from the Endangered Species Act to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act and the National Environmental Policy Act — allowed for quick construction of so-called bollard-style vehicle barriers along the Barry M. Goldwater Range, in far Southwestern Arizona.

In late October, Chertoff issued a similar waiver — using the authority that Congress granted in 2005 — to ensure construction of a stretch of primary fencing and bollards across most of a revered riparian area in the state's southeastern reaches.

As of the end of September, about 85 miles of pedestrian fencing and another 72 miles of vehicle barriers were standing in Arizona, Customs and Border Protection figures show. At least seven more miles were completed by the end of the calendar year.

Next year will see an even bigger building boom on the border. The Department of Homeland Security expects to build an additional 225 miles of pedestrian fencing and 200 miles of vehicle barriers across the Southwest's border with Mexico by the end of 2008. That will bring the total along the nearly 2,000-mile-long border to 670 miles.

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Jose Gonzalez, Border Patrol spokesman

The new fencing is part of a three-pronged investment in border security, Gonzalez said.

The other two parts are increasing use of new technology and greater manpower, with the fencing a critical part.

"If we have . . . miles of fences erected, there's not going to be as much traffic there, so we can concentrate on areas where there still is traffic," Gonzalez said.

For nearly a decade, Arizona's 377-mile southern border has been the most active corridor along the U.S. boundary with Mexico for illicit entry by smugglers, illegal entrants and drug traffickers. In turn, federal authorities have boosted efforts to ramp up resources — both infrastructure and manpower.

A border roadway has been created or improved, allowing for easier fence and barrier maintenance, and better response times from Border Patrol agents.

In urban areas, stadium-style lights and cameras have been installed atop tall towers to provide greater surveillance. And notably, near the San Luis port of entry, close to the Colorado River, the so-called primary fencing along the border has been supplemented by a second layer of tall mesh fencing north of the roadway. And east of the port of entry, it's backed up by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.

Other beefed-up security measures include new fences and vehicle barriers near border crossings.

And an experimental "virtual fence" made up of nine 98-foot towers was built a few miles north of the border at Sasabe.

The towers are topped with an array of sophisticated cameras, radars, sensors and communications gear designed to help border agents detect and track crossers.

In addition to the ground-based cameras and sensors, Customs and Border Protection's air and marine division has had two unmanned and unarmed aircraft flying along the Arizona-Mexico border to watch for illegal intruders.

"By having more technology and agents free, we can better secure our nation's border," Gonzalez said.

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