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# RECORD AZ POT SEIZURES

## Nearly half of confiscations along the Mexican line take place in Border Patrol's Tucson Sector

By Brady McCombs • Arizona Daily Star

NOGALES, Ariz. — The Mexican woman behind the wheel of the white Dodge Intrepid looks like any one of the thousands of legal border crossers who come through the Mariposa Port of Entry in Nogales.

It's Friday afternoon and her 12-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son are in the back seat dressed in their school uniforms with backpacks at their feet. The 30-year-old seemed to be a mom on her way to shop in Nogales, Ariz., after picking up her kids at school.

But, hidden behind the back seat, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers found four packages of marijuana wrapped in double plastic.

After a 90-minute search of the vehicle, they found 13 more bundles of pot inside the gas tank.

The 17 packages weighed a total of 57 pounds — a ho-hum bust along Arizona's border, which has become ground zero for marijuana smuggling.

In fiscal year 2007:

- The U.S. Border Patrol had a sixth consecutive record-breaking fiscal year. Agents seized 897,000 pounds — 48 percent of all marijuana seized by the agency on the U.S.-Mexican border — in 3,340 cases in the Tucson Sector, which stretches from the New Mexico line to the Yuma county line.
- Customs and Border Protection officers at Arizona's ports seized a record 76,000 pounds in 516 incidents.
- Federal, state and local law enforcement officers in Arizona seized a record 1.26 million pounds of marijuana in 5,016 cases, figures from the Arizona High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, or HIDTA, show. That's 42 percent of all marijuana seized along the southwest border.

Marijuana seizures have become so common at, or in between, Arizona's ports of entry that it happens every 1.7 hours on average. Officials seized an average of nearly 3,500 pounds a day.

Arizona's stretch of the U.S.-Mexican border has become grand central station for dope smugglers.

"The area is supplying pretty much all the market to some degree," Tracey Kalinowski, an intelligence analyst for the Southwest unit of the National Drug Intelligence Center. "It's an ideal spot if you are going to do that."

### Did You Know ...

The main vehicle border crossing into downtown Nogales, Ariz., is named after former U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini, who served from 1977 to 1995.

DeConcini currently serves on the Arizona Board of Regents.

The federal courthouse in Downtown Tucson is named after his father, Evo A. DeConcini, who served on the Arizona Supreme Court and Pima County Superior Court.

### Nickeling and diming 'em

- Law enforcement officials seized record levels of marijuana with mostly small to medium-size loads (20-499 pounds), accounting for 89 percent of the total cases in Arizona, and 56 percent of the total pounds seized; both three-year highs.

#### Number of seizures

Year Total seizures 20-499 lbs  
500+ lbs.

FY2005 2,836 2,474 362

FY2006 2,785 2,432 353

FY2007 3,887 3,450 437

#### Seizures by pounds

Year Total pounds 20-499 lbs.  
500+ lbs.

FY2005 887,927 424,512  
463,415

The proximity to major cities and highways in Mexico and Arizona; the harsh desert climate; vast expanses; and sparse populations along the border appeal to drug smugglers and make it difficult for law enforcement to stop them, said Lt. Ken Hunter of HIDTA, a federal intelligence-gathering agency that tracks drug loads moving across the U.S.-Mexican border.

FY2006 883,076 462,372  
420,704

FY2007 1,224,070 687,339  
536,731

Source: Arizona HIDTA Center

"The smugglers perceive Arizona as a desirable location, making it a major transportation hub," said Hunter, director of the investigative support center at HIDTA.

In its May 2007 Arizona drug-market analysis, HIDTA delivers a grim prognosis:

"Mexican drug trafficking organizations quite likely will expand their illicit drug smuggling activities from Mexico into Arizona, using established smuggling routes directly through Nogales, Douglas, San Luis, and other Arizona ports of entry; they also will increasingly smuggle wholesale quantities of illicit drugs, particularly marijuana, through remote areas between ports of entry. ... Their dominance will remain unchallenged in the foreseeable future."

### **What does it mean?**

Law enforcement officials and analysts are torn about what the increased seizures mean. There's a belief that a higher percentage of a similar quantity of drugs is being stopped, resulting in fewer drugs reaching the interior of the U.S. The other conclusion is that cops are no more successful than they've ever been, and higher seizures are proof that more drugs than ever are flowing into the country.

The increased seizures are good news, says Anthony Coulson, Drug Enforcement Administration assistant special agent in charge of the Tucson District Office.

"That's more than a billion dollars of drug revenue denied to drug trafficking organizations," he said.

But assessing the real impact is difficult, he said.

A recent report from the Government Accountability Office estimated that authorities are seizing about 30 percent of all marijuana produced in Mexico, but the National Drug Intelligence Center said that percentage is likely less.

"It's all guesswork," Coulson said. "People rely on it; it's the best thing that we have. But, still we have no idea how much marijuana is actually grown in Mexico. So, we can't say that we seized 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent. We can't say that."

The increased seizures are a logical outcome of the increased law enforcement presence and additional fences and technology on the border in Arizona, said Gabriel "Jack" Chin, the co-director of the Law, Criminal Justice and Security Program at the James E. Rogers College of Law at the University of Arizona.

"The more agents there are, the more seizures you are going to have," said Chin, who follows border criminal justice and security issues. "There are more places they can watch, more seizures they can do, more evidence they can gather."

Street prices in the south-western United States for commercial-grade marijuana haven't changed in recent years, and that casts a doubt on the theory that fewer drugs are making it into the market.

"Price is simply an indication of availability," said Ron Strong, supervisor of the National Drug Threat Assessment Unit within the National Drug Intelligence Center. "So, when you have stable prices it tells you that the demand and availability in that market has not changed much."

Still, law enforcement officials are confident they're making a difference and hurting the smugglers, particularly those moving hard drugs like cocaine, heroin and meth.

Kalinowski said he believes those smugglers may be trying to make up losses by smuggling more marijuana.

"Marijuana is pretty cheap to produce so they can make up the loss in profits from the cocaine, heroin and meth by shipping extra loads of marijuana across," Kalinowski said.

**Hopes for the future?**

Closing grand central station along Arizona's 350 miles of rugged and diverse border will be no easy task.

"This is ground zero," said Robert Boatright, deputy chief in the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector. "This is the focus of border security and illegal immigration in the nation right now."

The family-based drug-trafficking organizations know the terrain and routes well, and they are armed and ready to protect their loads. And they're always prepared to counter any move made by law enforcement.

Hunter hopes officials can make it so difficult on them that they'll move their routes out of Arizona.

"If you consistently focus on it, consistently adapt and use information and resources," Hunter said, "they will move, they will go the path of least resistance."

For more stories about the border, check out [azstarnet.com/border](http://www.azstarnet.com/border)

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