

(Editor's note: this is the first in a series of articles on border issues and immigration.)

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The radio crackles to life, and a voice recites a series of numbers and letters. I know what they are, but check with George Solis, my escort, anyway.

"GPS coordinates?" I ask.

"Yeah," Solis replies.

We're driving south on New Mexico 11, the two-lane road that leads from Deming to the border crossing near Columbus. Solis, a supervising Border Patrol agent, is giving me a tour of the area Thursday night. Solis tells me the system of Global Positioning System satellites circling the globe has been just one of the new tools available to agents since he began working in the Deming field office 10 years ago.

"Everything has changed," he says.

Many of the changes came about as a result of the 9/11 terror attacks. When Congress pushed to establish a Department of Homeland Security, the Customs Service and Border Patrol were consolidated into one agency within the department: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Other changes have been more recent, since immigration reform became such a hot topic. Solis remarks on the news that, earlier in the day, the U.S. Senate voted down consideration of a comprehensive immigration reform bill. It was the second time this year the bill was defeated.

"I hear they're not going to try again until 2009," Solis says, which reflects what I heard many analysts report that afternoon.

The discussion turns to the National Guard units stationed along the border. In May 2006, President George W. Bush announced he would send troops to the border area to help stem the northward flow of illegal immigrants. One year ago, the first units from Utah arrived and began that mission.

Earlier, in his office, Manuel Martinez, a Border Patrol field operations supervisor, told me the National Guard units have had a tremendous impact on the number of immigrants coming north.

"Our apprehensions are down to about 1,000 a month," Martinez said, "from sometimes 4,000 or 5,000 a month last year."

According to Martinez, the National Guard troops allow him to put more agents "on the line," patrolling the area between the border and New Mexico 9. The two-lane road stretches from Santa Teresa to Hachita, and farther west to the Arizona border. In Luna County, it is sometimes a few hundred

yards from Mexico, and the space between is where the Border Patrol concentrates its efforts.

For operational reasons, Martinez can't tell me the exact number of Border Patrol agents who are assigned to the sector, but says there are "about 300." The number is growing. Congress authorized another 1,000 agents last year, and Martinez expects another 30 for his sector before the end of September. The new agents will have plenty of work, though .

"Columbus used to be our big problem area," Solis says as we approach a checkpoint 13 miles north of the port of entry. The checkpoint, he explains, is a recent addition.

"They used to try to get to Columbus, where they could get in a car and head north." Solis explains. "Now, they know they'll get caught at the checkpoint."

Martinez said most smugglers try to take a route west of New Mexico 11, aiming for the rest stop on Interstate 10 between Deming and Lordsburg. The next stop on the journey is Phoenix or Albuquerque. Solis said some smugglers head north through Silver City, then on to Reserve and Arizona. In addition, the price has gone up for immigrants seeking assistance in crossing the border.

"It used to be \$1,200," Solis says, "but now it's up to \$1,800 — and that's just to get you to Phoenix or Albuquerque."

Once there, he explains, illegal immigrants must pony up more money if they want to head farther west. Fewer and fewer are making it outside the Deming patrol area, thanks to a multiagency effort to crack down on border crossings.

On the radio, the agent reading the coordinates says he's lost the trail. Solis says the man they're tracking is an immigrant who was part of a group but fell behind.

"When we catch a group, we interview them," he says.

The immigrants identified the smuggler, who admitted to leaving one of his "clients" behind.

"Under the law," Solis says, "if the man dies, the smuggler could face the death penalty."

Border Patrol agents are well suited to tracking a group of illegals, but one man poses a challenge.

"If you have five, seven, 10 people in a group, they'll leave a trail through the grass," Solis explains. "But one person doesn't leave much to track."

On the radio, the agent who was following the trail is relaying his location. Agents farther north will then travel to the correct longitude and begin searching south.

This morning, I learned the missing man was never found. Agents believe he may have walked out on his own, or that the search area identified by the captured group was not correct.

While GPS helps units coordinate their actions, or when an agent is in distress, it's a small component of a system designed to catch border crossers as quickly as possible. There are 14 towers, equipped with visual and infrared cameras, at strategic locations in the area. Solis points to a horse corral near one of the towers.

"We used to have agents camped out in there with binoculars," he says.

Another recent addition are the vehicle barriers. Solis tells me the hollow steel fence, which is then filled with concrete, has been very effective at stopping vehicles from making runs north.

"None of this used to be here," he says, pointing to the vehicle barrier, and to a parking lot, some shops and a few homes that are 50 yards from the border. Now, much of the area is paved, and floodlights keep the ground lit during the night.

As we follow the vehicle barrier, a larger structure begins to loom in front of us. Solis says it's part of the 15-foot fence approved by Congress in October.

"They've been working on it for about a month," Silos says.

As we approach, I see men welding the latest section in place. Each section has nine 4-inch-wide posts welded to a horizontal support. The sections are then welded together. The fence sits in a 4-foot-deep trench, which will be filled with concrete later.

"Each section weighs 2,700 pounds," Solis explains.

We continue on our journey west, toward Las Chepas. As we drive, Solis checks to ensure the vehicle barrier is intact.

"They cut it down all the time," he says. "We have an agent drive this route every day to make sure it's still up."

Although the barrier has been an effective measure, it, too, has its problems. U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman recently sent a letter to the head of CBP, when it was discovered that a section of the barrier had been built on the Mexican side of the border.

"I encourage you to make every effort to ensure that such errors do not occur in the future," Bingaman wrote. "Having to tear down the newly constructed barrier is not only a waste of taxpayer money, but also hampers our ability to adequately secure our borders."

Eventually, we enter what agents call the "West Farm Area." We're in the Johnson Family Farm, which supplies produce under the Carzalia Valley Produce brand.

Suddenly, Solis reaches for the radio. A sensor has registered movement, and it's near our location. Solis responds to the call, and asks for more specific information.

As we continue west on the dirt road, with rows of green produce to the north and empty fields to the south, I imagine it would be impossible to hide: the area is farmland, and as flat as anything I've ever seen.

Between fields, however, Solis stops the vehicle, and hops out to inspect an arroyo. He spots some footprints in the sand, but decides they're not what we're looking for.

A Mexican community of about 35, Las Chepas gained national notoriety last year when Gov. Bill Richardson asked Gov. Jose Reyes, his Chihuahuan counterpart, to raze the town with bulldozers.

I ask Solis about a sign on the outskirts of the community.

"They put in a toll booth," he says. "The smugglers were bringing vans and buses full of people through here all the time, and making all the money."

As we begin the homeward stretch north, we pass the inflatable radar blimp that motorists can see from the interstate. According to Solis, the U.S. Air Force operates the blimp to keep an eye out for low-flying aircraft.

"If they see something suspicious, they'll check with the FAA for a flight plan," he says. If there's no flight plan on file for the plane, "they'll give us a call."

Closer to Deming, we begin to see lightning flash to the south and east. I ask Solis how late his shift will last.

"It depends on how things go down there," he said. "If something happens during shift change, you know you're going to be late."

As we pull into the Border Patrol compound, Solis turns and asks, "It's Thursday, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I respond.

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