



Obama signs \$600 million bill for border

Hundreds more agents, boost in training, drones part of package

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Originally published August 13, 2010 at 11:15 p.m., updated August 14, 2010 at 12:02 a.m.



Nelvin C. Cepeda

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in San Diego reported a record increase in the number of local maritime detentions as those attempting to cross tried to avoid tightened security at places such as the San Ysidro Port of Entry. Nelvin C. Cepeda / U-T

SPENDING CATEGORIES FOR \$600 MILLION LAW



Information networks: An unspecified amount of money for more powerful cameras, wireless communications technology and additional outposts to relay and analyze data promptly.



Drones: About \$32 million for two unmanned, long-range aerial detection systems. The Border Patrol currently uses Predator B drones made by General Atomics in Poway.



Administrative: Nearly \$530 million to boost staffing, provide training and create programs for the Border Patrol, Department of Justice and other agencies.

President Barack Obama signed a \$600 million bill Friday aimed at strengthening security along the

nearly 2,000-mile border with Mexico, a move some experts see as a step toward a long-term solution for illegal immigration, drug trafficking and other binational challenges.

The money will pay for hundreds more agents, increased training, new border-related programs, enhanced communications equipment and greater use of surveillance drones. Critics on both sides of the divide said the legislation fails to address the causes of the United States' immigration morass.

"I am not convinced that the law is a good use of resources because I am not sure it will prevent immigrants from coming into the country," said Charles Pope, interim director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. "As long as there is a lack of economic parity, immigrants are going to find a way into the U.S."

Although Congress has deadlocked on previous attempts to change federal immigration policy, proponents of the new, bipartisan funding package said it represents the kind of broad support needed amid the battle over an illegal-immigration law in Arizona.

"My sense is that the (Obama) administration is making an effort, that another 1,500 agents on the border is not something to laugh at," said Rick Su, an immigration-law expert from the University at Buffalo Law School in New York. "I think it is way too cynical to dismiss it outright as a political maneuver."

The Senate approved the border-security bill during a special session Thursday. Obama signed it into law one month after re-emphasizing his commitment to securing the border while also tackling the legal status of an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants living in the country.

Obama has authorized the deployment of 1,200 National Guard troops — including some from California — to the border region for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support.

Republicans, for the most part, backed the bill signed Friday despite complaints that it didn't provide enough customs inspectors along the border.

The new package will pay for 1,000 additional Border Patrol agents, 250 Customs and Border Protection officers and 250 Immigration and Customs Enforcement specialists to target a wide range of smuggling — from drug and arms trafficking to ferrying migrants on boats.

It also designates funding for Department of Justice programs that will investigate and prosecute organized drug gangs. And it will cover the purchase of two unmanned surveillance planes.

The number of Border Patrol agents has doubled since 2004 — to more than 20,000. More than 2,500 of them are assigned to San Diego County, said Jose Morales, an agent based out of El Cajon.

But statistics can be deceiving, said Michael Lytle, an expert on national security and a professor at the University of Texas at Brownsville. Not all of those agents are assigned to the border, he said, and it likely will take at least eight months to recruit and train new agents.

"This infusion we're expecting to get is necessary, but we have to translate them into real people doing real jobs on the border," Lytle added.

There are six entry ports on the California border with Mexico. The 65-mile-long section of the border spanning San Diego County has seen significant improvement in the number of apprehensions, said

Andy Carey, executive director of the San Diego-based Border Philanthropy Partnership.

The Border Patrol apprehended 60,029 people from last October through July, Morales said.

The San Diego Department of Homeland Security Maritime Unified Command, a partnership of several law-enforcement agencies, saw a more than sixfold increase in maritime drug interdictions in waters along the Southwest border. These agencies seized 57,437 pounds of drugs in fiscal year 2009 compared with 8,884 pounds the previous year.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in San Diego reported a record increase in the number of local maritime detentions as those trying to cross the border looked for ways to avoid tightened security at the San Ysidro, Otay Mesa and Tecate ports of entry.

ICE agents in the local region seized more than 26,000 pounds of narcotics off boats and apprehended more than 700 people, said spokeswoman Lauren Mack.

So far in fiscal 2010, the Coast Guard has seized 11,500 pounds of drugs across the San Diego sector.

“We support the efforts of the administration and recognize this significant investment,” said Carey, whose organization works with nonprofit groups along the U.S.-Mexico border. “I have to add, though, that investment in strictly military and police is not enough. The border region is grossly under-resourced and receives very little outside investment.”

The beefed-up enforcement has led to some unintended consequences over time.

Drug and weapons smugglers have increasingly built sophisticated organizations to dodge authorities. Meanwhile, Pope said, the United States hasn't made a systematic effort to address the domestic demand for drugs, weapons and illegal-immigrant labor.

He said one solution would be to shift from a law-enforcement perspective to one focused on public health and welfare. Instead of mainly investing in arrests, courts and detention facilities, for example, it may be worth dedicating more resources to help prevent drug use and expand rehabilitation services.

“Regardless of where you stand, I think we are seeing a consensus that we need to change the dialogue and start focusing on longer-term solutions,” Pope said.

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