

SOUTHWEST GEOGRAPHIC AREA

Safety Alert

5/05/2011

Subject: US- Mexico Border Fire Operations Safety

Area of Concern: Firefighter and Public Safety

Distribution: SW Geographic Area

The US-Mexico Border has become increasingly dangerous:

Health and safety concerns of employees and the public in areas adjacent to the US- Mexico border stem from two types of illegal activities on or near the border between Brownsville, TX, and San Diego, CA: drug smuggling and illegal immigration. Each of these illegal activities poses specific safety and health threat to personnel working on or near the border. The border violence has escalated to the highest levels over the last year.

Drug Smuggling:

Drug smuggling includes a variety of activities related to the transport and distribution of drugs, across the Mexican border into the United States. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency has deemed this area a high-intensity drug trafficking area (HIDTA). Drug smugglers are moving large quantities of drugs across Federal lands and they also are using recreation sites to stage the distribution of drugs to other parts of the United States. Drug smugglers are always considered potentially violent because they don't want to be caught or lose their load of drugs.

Illegal Immigration:

Activities associated with illegal immigration fall into two categories: the operations of those trafficking in illegal immigrants, or "coyotes," and the activities of the illegal immigrants themselves as they are being transported, or are transporting themselves, across the Mexican border into the United States. Most illegal immigrants simply want to be left alone in their quest to come to the United States, the coyotes who assist in the trafficking of illegal immigrants are a different story. Coyotes tend to blend into the group of illegal immigrants to avoid detection. These coyotes are engaged in illegal activities, could be armed, and don't want to be caught. An encounter with these individuals poses a threat to personal safety.

Even though there have been no reported cases of physical harm to a field employees, there have been cases of serious injury to law enforcement officers.

Problems Fighting Wildland Fires

All personnel responding to fires along the US- Mexico border need to be aware of issues related to illegal activities on or near the border and have a understanding of the unique problems they will face while fighting fire near the border. It is imperative that agency offices along the border provide IMT's and incoming resources a very through briefing on the unique border safety issues.

There is a real possibility firefighters will encounter illegal immigrants or drug smugglers. When firefighters encounter immigrants or smugglers, the firefighters may be distracted, losing the situational awareness they need to keep themselves and their crews safe. It is important that IMT's responding to the border region set up coordinated efforts with local law enforcement in anticipation of illegal activities.

For those firefighters or individuals that may be involved in fire suppression on the Mexico side of the border, there are additional safety concerns that need to be considered. Be aware that while in Mexico, you may not have support from law enforcement and/or medical support should an emergency occur. In this event, it is crucial that sufficient efforts are in place to mitigate these circumstances, should they occur. Also ensure that all employees are advised adequately of the risks before being place in these situations.

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These are potential situations firefighters could encounter:

1. Illegal immigrant and smugglers warming fires have started wildland fires.
2. Illegal activity along the border has involved “copy cat vehicles” painted to look like agency vehicles.
3. Radios and phones don’t work in many locations on the border.
4. Awareness that when using cell phones to communicate, you may experience interference from Mexico.
5. Conflicts in air space with helicopters assigned to the fire and helicopters used for law enforcement.
6. Undocumented aliens are hiding or camping within or adjacent to the incident operations.
6. Potential health risks associated with large amounts of trash or caches of drugs burning.
7. Arson fires being started to divert attention from illegal activities happening nearby.
8. Clusters of illegal immigrant vehicles.
9. Packs and equipment being stolen.
10. Potential lack of law enforcement or medical support on the Mexico side of the border.

Border Safety Information:

The US Forest Service and other agencies have developed protocols and training materials to help increase the safety awareness for firefighters working along the border. Links to additional information are on the SWCC website with this Safety Alert under Safety Management. http://gacc.nifc.gov/swcc/management_admin/safety/us_mexico_border/us_mexico_border.htm

- **Border Fire Initial Attack Protocol**, and **International Border Watchouts** pocket card, Coronado National Forest.
- **Borderland Safeguards**, pamphlet AZ BLM.
- MTDC study; Personal Safety Of Federal Land-Management Field Employees Working Along The Mexican Border. Contact Lisa Outka-Perkins at MTDC: Phone: 406-329-3849, Fax: 406-329-3719, E-mail: loutka-perkins@fs.fed.us
- MTDC Safety Training DVD; *Personal Safety in Remote Work Locations*. Segment 1, **Working on the Border**, emphasizes awareness, segment 2, **Managing Unexpected Encounters on the Border**. Contact Lisa Outka-Perkins at MTDC: Phone: 406-329-3849, Fax: 406-329-3719, E-mail: loutka-perkins@fs.fed.us
- FWS Buenos Aires RX Information in Spanish