

SOUTHWEST GEOGRAPHIC AREA

Safety Alert

Date: March 2014

Subject: US- Mexico Border Fire Operations Safety

Area of Concern: Firefighter and Public Safety

Distribution: Southwest Geographic Area

The US-Mexico Border Safety Concerns:

Border violence continues to create Health and Safety concerns for employees and the public in areas adjacent to the US- Mexico border stemming 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. Also, Bandits along the border sometimes try to intercept illegal immigrants and drug shipments with the intent of robbing them. These people are usually armed and may resort to violence.

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 should always be considered potentially violent.

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. 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. Most illegal immigrants simply want to be left alone and will normally attempt to avoid all contact. Extreme caution should always be practiced when encountering any individuals along or near the border. Even though there have been no reported cases of physical harm to field employees, there have been cases of serious injury and deaths of 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 an understanding of the unique problems they could potentially face. It is imperative that agency offices along the border provide IMT’s and incoming resources a very thorough briefing on current border issues and protocols. The possibility exists that firefighters will encounter illegal immigrants or drug smugglers along the border areas. If firefighters encounter immigrants or smugglers, they must remain vigilant to the tasks at hand while keeping themselves and their crews safe. It is important that initial attack resources, incident commanders, and Incident Management Teams responding to the border region set up coordinated efforts with local law enforcement (e.g., Border Patrol) in preparation for illegal activities. The following are potential situations firefighters could encounter:

1. Illegal immigrant and smugglers warming, cooking, signal, and diversion fires have started wildland fires.
2. Illegal activity along the border has involved “copycat vehicles” painted to look like agency vehicles.
3. Radios and phones don’t work in many locations on the border.
4. When cell phones do work, a call placed to law enforcement might connect to an operator in 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. High speed vehicle traffic from fleeing vehicles or pursuits.
9. Packs and equipment being stolen.

Border Safety Information:

The Southwest Area Agencies have developed protocols and training materials to help increase the safety awareness for firefighters working along the border. Links to these and additional information are on the SWCC website under Safety Management.

- International Border Watchouts / Border Risk Areas**, pocket card.
- Border Fire Response Protocols** by Dispatch Center.
- Borderland Safegaurds**, pamphlet AZ BLM.
- Interagency Aviation Information bulletin IA 2011-02, Aviation Operations Within Mutual Aid Zone USA/Mexico**
- Working Along the United States-Mexico Border**, MTDC Safety Training DVD# 0823 2D11. The DVD has three-modules. Modules one and two are designed for anyone who works near the border. Module three is specifically for firefighters. Also YouTube Weblinks for these Modules are listed.