

Border Tunnels



Working to stop the construction of tunnels used to transport drugs across the U.S.–Mexico border



Dear Californian,

For years, smugglers have struggled to bypass our border checkpoints. Now they are changing tactics by tunneling beneath the border to evade U.S. enforcement agents. These tunnels are increasing in size, frequency and sophistication, which means more and more drugs are entering our country below our feet.

In 2006, I visited a sophisticated tunnel discovered by the multi-agency San Diego Tunnel Task Force, stretching from an abandoned warehouse near the southern border of California into Tijuana, Mexico.

The tunnel was 2,400 feet long – nearly a half-mile – the longest cross-border tunnel ever discovered. It reached more than nine stories below ground at its deepest point and had ample ventilation and groundwater drainage systems, cement flooring, lighting and a pulley system.

Authorities seized over 4,200 pounds of marijuana in the tunnel. Later, the operation was attributed to the Arellano Felix drug-trafficking organization.

Tunnels like this are being used to transport narcotics from Mexico into the United States, but could also be used to smuggle weapons and people. Tunnels can range from shallow dirt crawlways to sophisticated concrete structures with shoring, ventilation and electricity. One recent tunnel even included a makeshift elevator.

After seeing the tunnel in San Diego, I introduced the *Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2006*, which became law the next year. The bill criminalized the construction, financing or use of an unauthorized tunnel into the United States. Unfortunately, criminals are finding ways to get around the law.

In 2011, I introduced a new bill to enhance the law and provide law enforcement and prosecutors additional tools to locate tunnels, identify criminals and punish those responsible.

Underground tunnels present a serious national security threat, and I will continue to work with California law enforcement, prosecutors and our Mexican counterparts to prevent their construction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Dianne Feinstein". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dianne" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Feinstein".

Senator Dianne Feinstein

FINDING TUNNELS

In recent years, a crackdown on drug smugglers in Mexico and tighter U.S. border security above ground has led to dramatic increases in the use and sophistication of tunnels under the border.

A tunnel found in San Diego in November 2011 had a hydraulically controlled steel door, elevator and electric rail tracks. This tunnel is the most sophisticated cross-border tunnel discovered to date and the second longest. It ranks as both the largest drug seizure associated with a border tunnel and one of the largest drug seizures in U.S. history, with approximately 32 tons of marijuana found. It is thought to have been built by the Sinaloa drug-trafficking organization, which operates in Mexico along the border area where the bulk of subterranean passages are discovered.



Tunnel with electric rail tracks

This is no longer a pick-and-shovel operation. Some tunnels look to have been made with equipment such as hydraulic lifts, elevators, generators and water pumps.

ANTI-TUNNELING LEGISLATION

Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011

The first cross-border tunnel was discovered in May 1990 and the number of tunnels increased dramatically in 2001. According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an astonishing 152 tunnels were discovered between 2001 and 2011.

The *Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011* builds on my 2006 *Border Tunnel Prevention Act*, which criminalized the construction or financing of unauthorized tunnels or subterranean passages across an international border. Permitting others to construct or use an unauthorized tunnel or subterranean passage on their land would also be considered a criminal offense.



"El Grande" tunnel discovered in 2006 in Otay Mesa



U.S. warehouse exit point of the massive 2006 Otay Mesa tunnel

The *Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011* would further deter tunnel activities by providing enhanced investigative tools to law enforcement and increasing prosecutorial options. This would be done by:

- Making use, construction or financing of a border tunnel a conspiracy offense. This would punish the intent to engage in tunneling activity, even in cases where a tunnel was not fully constructed.
- Designating illegal tunneling as an offense eligible for wire interception.
- Defining border-tunnel activity as unlawful under existing forfeiture and money laundering provisions to allow authorities to seize assets in these cases.

The *Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011* has a number of notification requirements that take effect no later than 18 months after the date of the enactment. Specifically; the bill:


- Encourages the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to continue outreach efforts to both private and government land owners and tenants in areas along the border between Mexico and the United States. People who live in these areas should be notified of tunnel laws and ways they can report suspicious activity.
- Requires DHS to report each year to Congress on cross-border tunnel construction and update Congress on the needs of the Department to effectively prevent, investigate and prosecute border-tunnel construction.

Drug Trafficking Organizations

Map depicting Areas of Dominant Influence


This map represents areas of dominant presence of Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). It is subject to change given the fluid nature of Mexican DTOs.


Mexican DTOs


 Sinaloa


 Gulf


 La Familia Michoacana

 No Dominant Presence

 Juarez

 Los Zetas

 Beltran-Leyva Organization

 Tijuana

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)
Current as of May 2011

Questions or comments about this product are welcome and should be directed to DEA's Strategic Intelligence Section at (202) 307-5442.

SENATE DRUG CAUCUS

Senator Dianne Feinstein is chairman of the **Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control**, commonly known as the Drug Caucus, which has oversight of U.S. and international counternarcotics policy. The Caucus’ seven bipartisan members work to combat international narcotics trafficking and reduce domestic drug abuse.

As chairman, Senator Feinstein is particularly interested in U.S. efforts to reduce drug trafficking and drug-related violence in Mexico and Afghanistan. The Caucus has held hearings on strategies to dismantle Mexican drug trafficking organizations, efforts to stop money laundering from the United States to Mexico, the proliferation of border tunnels along the Southwest border and the Taliban’s shift to drug trafficking in Afghanistan.

The Caucus has been particularly focused on the dangers of illegal drugs in U.S. communities. It has held hearings on how to stop methamphetamine production and abuse and the dangers of new synthetic drugs such as K2, Spice and bath salts.

Chairman Feinstein has authored a number of reports with her colleagues on how best to reduce the trafficking of illegal drugs and drug-related violence.

- “U.S. and Mexican Responses to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations” outlines key steps and initiatives to combat Mexico’s brutal drug trafficking organizations and reduce violence in the country, and offers Congress and the administration recommendations on how to jointly work with Mexico to stop drug trafficking.
- “Halting U.S. Firearms Trafficking to Mexico” urges Congress and the administration to strengthen firearms laws to stem drug-related violence, citing data that 70 percent of weapons recovered in Mexico and traced originated from the United States.
- “Responding to Violence in Central America” argues that Central America is at a dangerous crossroads and calls for security in the subregion to become a higher priority.
- “U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan” describes the Taliban’s shift to drug trafficking, a threat which cannot be ignored. Drug trafficking provides the terrorist organization with a lucrative source of financing that puts the U.S. mission in Afghanistan at risk. The report asserts that the drug problem in Afghanistan should not be ignored.

For more information visit: www.drugcaucus.senate.gov



Senator Feinstein chairs a hearing on border tunnels

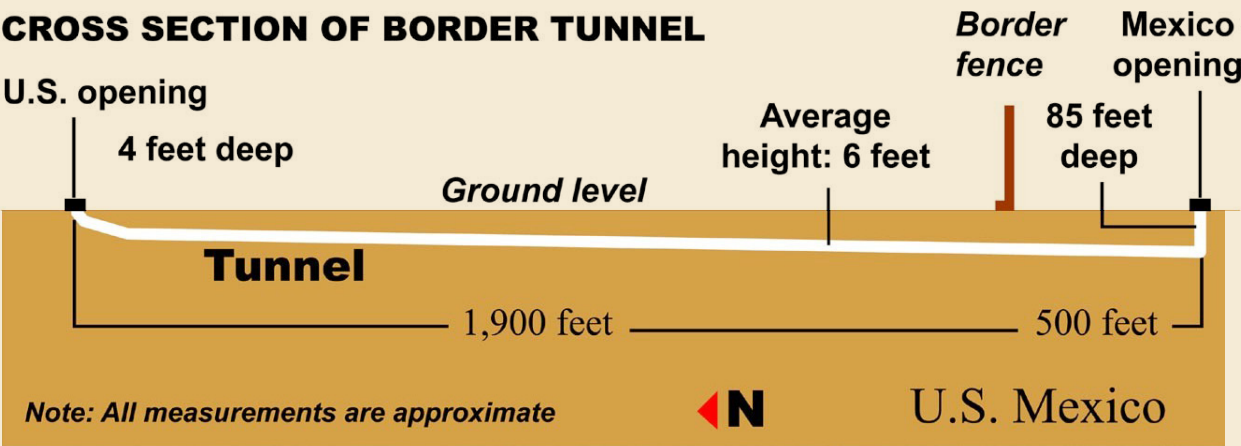
WORKING WITH MEXICO

What happens in Mexico directly effects the United States, and the reciprocal is also true. The United States provides counternarcotics assistance throughout the world, but our security partnership with Mexico is unique since we share a 1,969 mile border.

The drug trade has long been associated with violence, but the recent escalation has been unprecedented. Stopping this violence will take cooperation from those of us on both sides of the border.

Senators Feinstein and Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), co-chairs of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, authored a report outlining key steps and initiatives to combat Mexico’s brutal drug trafficking organizations and reduce violence in the country.

Senators Feinstein and Grassley meant for this report to act as a guide as authorities work to curb the drug trade and the violence associated with it. The report, “U.S. and Mexican Responses to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations,” made several recommendations (see next page) for the U.S. government.



REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS:

Money Laundering – Do more to starve Mexico’s drug trafficking organizations of the money that fuels them. In 2011, the Obama Administration acted on this by making pre-paid gift and credit cards—known as stored value—subject to cross-border reporting requirements.

Mérida Initiative – Call for the State Department to expedite assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative, a binational security assistance program that includes air assets, other equipment and training.

Justice Reform – Provide judicial sector training through the Mérida Initiative to each Mexican state that requests it.

Southbound Inspections — Strengthen infrastructure and staffing needs at the Southwest border — including important tools like License Plate Readers—and activities and resources by the Mexican Government to stand-up southbound inspections on the Mexican side of the border.

Border Tunnels – Call on Congress to pass the *Border Tunnel Prevention Act* to strengthen laws to further deter tunnel activities and increase prosecutorial options.

Cross-Border Kidnappings – Call on the FBI to develop and sponsor a vetted unit with trusted Mexican counterparts to conduct investigations of the kidnappings of U.S. citizens.

The entire report can be found at www.drugcaucus.senate.gov

February 21, 2012

Pot-Smuggling Tunnels in Tijuana Grow More Elaborate

By Tim Johnson
McClatchy Newspapers — February 21, 2012

TIJUANA ---- When smuggling goes smoothly for the marijuana division of the huge Sinaloa Cartel, cross-border deliveries unfold with clockwork precision.

Harvested marijuana arrives in plastic-wrapped bales to a depot hidden among the rundown warehouses on the Mexican side of the concrete U.S. border fence.

Once enough marijuana is collected, workers drop the vacuum-packed bales through shafts leading to the ever-more-elaborate tunnels that cross underneath the border through the clay-laden soil.

U.S. agents have been waging war against the tunnels for years, using a range of high-tech devices from ground-penetrating radar to seismic sensors to find and destroy them. But despite the efforts, drug smugglers continue to build the tunnels, often spending \$1 million to dig a single pathway equipped with lighting, forced-air ventilation, water pumps, shoring on walls and hydraulic elevators.

Lately, new tunnels have included railways. The bales move on electric mining carts with hand throttles that roll at up to 15 mph.

“A tunnel represents an incursion into the U.S., and it’s a national security event,” said Jose M. Garcia, who oversees the federal multi-agency San Diego Tunnel Task Force.

The location of the tunnels helps explain why agents have such difficulty finding them. The area where the most advanced tunnels have been found is adjacent to the Tijuana international airport, where scores of planes take off and land daily. Nearby warehouses buzz with legitimate activity.

“All that noise from the airport is a great advantage to them,” said Victor Clark Alfaro, an anthropologist and human rights activist in Tijuana who also lectures at San Diego State University. “This border is perforated like an anthill.”

U.S. officials say they have found more than 160 tunnels since 1990 along the 1,954-mile border, mostly in the stretch of Mexico that borders Arizona and California. In the past 15 months, U.S. agents have busted increasingly sophisticated tunnels.

Geography and geology make the intensely urban Tijuana-San Diego corridor ideal for the tunnels. Tijuana is Mexico’s sixth largest city, with 1.3 million people, while San Diego is the eighth largest U.S. city,

with several interstate highways. Moreover, soil here has a composition that’s easy to dig.

In a two-week span last November, U.S. agents shut down two sophisticated tunnels that led from an area near Tijuana’s airport to the Otay Mesa industrial park on the U.S. side. Some 49 tons of marijuana were seized. The discoveries marked the second year in a row in which elaborate tunnels were found within a mile of the busy Otay Mesa border crossing.

U.S. officials are sensitive about a public view that they aren’t finding the tunnels.

“Understandably, American citizens react to news stories about the discovery of a large tunnel, complete with plumbing, lights, ventilation and a rudimentary railway system, with a mixture of surprise, indignation, alarm and dismay,” Laura E. Duffy, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of California, told the Senate drug caucus last June.

“How, they ask, can such a sophisticated illegal structure be constructed right under our noses?” Part of the difficulty, she said, is that drug traffickers use horizontal drills that cost up to \$75,000 and can cut without disturbing topsoil. The tunnels run anywhere from 30 to 90 feet deep, avoiding greater depths, which would hit underground water tables.

Drug traffickers also have been adept at setting up bogus U.S. companies to rent space in bustling Otay Mesa and its 600 warehouses and 12,000 businesses. Many firms are unaware of activities by their neighbors, perhaps noticing only if there’s truck traffic at unusual hours.

Garcia said that even with devices such as seismic sensors, a majority of tunnel busts came from tip-offs by informants or suspicious warehouse operators.

Big tunnels are thought to be the work of the Sinaloa Cartel, which has seized control of Tijuana from the local Arellano-Felix cartel after years of bloody conflict and now is operating in tandem with remnants of the group.

Sinaloa operatives employ mining engineers and architects to help construct their tunnels, while keeping knowledge of locations to as few people as possible.

Experts on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force say “some tunnel excavators in Mexico are killed when the job is done to prevent them from spreading the word on the location,” Duffy told senators.

Marijuana growers are turning to ever-larger plantations to meet the capacity of bigger tunnels. Last

July, soldiers found a 300-acre screened and irrigated marijuana plantation near San Quintin, 150 miles south of Tijuana, which was four times larger than any such site that had been seized before. Eight months earlier, soldiers seized 148 tons – 134 metric tons – of pot in Tijuana, a record.

U.S. and Mexican agents say that tunnel digging, using pneumatic spades, generally is limited to teams of six or seven men. They live at the Tijuana site where the tunnel begins, and excavation is timed to conclude with the harvesting of marijuana crops in late summer and early autumn, so there’s little time for the tunnel to sit idle and be detected.

“The process is tedious,” Garcia said, involving working day and night and lugging bags of dirt along the shaft for removal.

But even with million-dollar investments, Garcia said, the tunnel builders “recoup that by making just one trip, given the value of the narcotics we’ve seized.”

Most bales of marijuana carry stickers, often fanciful images such as Donald Duck, Captain America, Budweiser or Homer Simpson. The stickers indicate ownership and destination, U.S. agents said. Tunnel operatives make sure to recoup their investments first.

“The way it works is the tunnel guys build it, so their stuff gets through first. Once it gets through, they start hiring out” to other drug organizations, said Louis Gomez, the supervisor of the San Diego Tunnel Task Force, which includes agents of Customs and Border Protection, the Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement.

Tunnel shafts on the Tijuana side that a McClatchy Newspapers journalist visited included one hidden in the floor of a walk-in freezer in a warehouse that’s only two football fields away from warehouses on the U.S. side of the border.

Another shaft was hidden in a unique fashion: “It was the entire floor of a bathroom that went up and down, and they used a hydraulic lift like you’d see in a service station,” Garcia said.

Tijuana Police Chief Alberto Capella Ibarra said the tunnels kept growing in sophistication.

“It speaks of the strength and economic power of the cartels, because these tunnels are a huge investment for them,” Capella said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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