Cocaine, marijuana worth $11.5 million seized at border

by Leslie Berestein

SAN DIEO - Almost 10,000 pounds of smuggled marijuana have been discovered by federal agents along California's border with Mexico in the past week, the latest example of an ongoing spike in drug seizures borderwide. Border Patrol agents in El Centro, Calif., have seized nearly four tons of drugs in separate incidents since Friday, including 3,300 pounds of pot stuffed in a U-Haul truck found east of Calexico. In all, the more than 7,000 pounds of marijuana and 177 pounds of cocaine they seized are worth more than $11.5 million.

At the San Ysidro port of entry Monday morning, inspectors discovered a U.S. citizen smuggling more than 2,500 pounds of pot hidden in a van and trailer.

Federal officials say there is no way to be sure if there are more drugs coming across or more drugs are being discovered. Since the beginning of October, the start of the 2007 federal fiscal year, drug seizures have been up nationwide. According to Border Patrol statistics, cocaine seizures along the Southwest border are up 83 percent over the same period last year, and marijuana seizures up 29 percent.

Todd Fraser, a Border Patrol spokesman in Washington, D.C., said that cocaine seizures were relatively low at this time last year, which partly explains the jump. However, he said, more marijuana has been seized year-to-date on the Southwest border than in any of the previous four years. Just since 2005, the agency's marijuana seizures have jumped to 821,485 pounds from 509,625. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the quantity of drugs confiscated at the six ports of entry on the California-Mexico border during October, November and December jumped 22 percent over the same period a year ago, with marijuana up 21 percent, cocaine up 57 percent and methamphetamine up 49 percent. "Is it a combination of tighter border security and more narcotics being thrown at us? It could be one or both," said Vince Bond, a Customs and Border Protection spokesman in San Diego. "The good news is we are getting more of it."

California's ports of entry account for 46 percent of the marijuana confiscated along the Southwest border so far this fiscal year, and 36 percent of the cocaine.

Bond has cited a bumper crop in Mexico's pot-growing regions as possibly contributing to the jump in

marijuana seizures. Meanwhile, seven cross-border drug tunnels that sat unfilled after being discovered are to be filled with concrete by May 15, according to Customs and Border Protection.

Five are in California, including a record-length 2,400-foot-long tunnel found in January 2006 that ran between Tijuana and Otay Mesa. About two tons of pot were discovered inside.

Michael Friel, an agency spokesman in Washington, D.C., said the tunnels had been plugged but not filled completely. They will be filled in as far as the border, he said.

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