

## **Illegals light border fires to sidetrack U.S. agents**

By Jerry Seper  
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U.S. Border Patrol agents seeking to secure the nation's border in some of the country's most pristine national forests are being targeted by illegal aliens, who are using intentionally set fires to burn agents out of observation posts and patrol routes.

The wildfires have destroyed valuable natural and cultural resources in the National Forest System and pose an ongoing threat to visitors, residents and responding firefighters, according to federal law-enforcement authorities and others.

In the Coronado National Forest in Arizona, with 60 miles of land along the U.S.-Mexico border, U.S. Forest Service firefighters sent in to battle fires or clear wild-land fire areas are required to be escorted by armed law-enforcement officers.

Armed smugglers of aliens and drugs have walked through the middle of active firefighting operations, the authorities said.

The Border Patrol's Tucson, Ariz., sector, which encompasses most of the Coronado National Forest, has the highest incidence of cross-border violators in the nation. Nearly 500,000 illegal aliens were apprehended last year -- more than 30,000 a month. In addition, nearly 100,000 pounds of marijuana, with a street value of \$200 million, was seized as it was hauled through the Coronado National Forest.

Last month, the Border Patrol -- in a single operation targeting illegal aliens causing what Forest Service officials called "significant damage" to the Coronado National Forest -- apprehended more than 300 illegals along just a three-mile section of U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona and confiscated 600 pounds of marijuana in a 10-day period.

At least five fires were set below a Border Patrol observation post during the operation in an effort to burn the agents out, according to a Forest Service report. The fires were extinguished, and no one was arrested.

Wildfires are being set by alien and drug smugglers, authorities said, to create a diversion in an attempt to gain undetected access across the border. The fires correspond to a dramatic rise in assaults against Border Patrol agents -- up more than 100 percent over last year.

"Criminal activity by both illegal immigrants and citizens in forests near the border is a threat to members of the public trying to use their public lands and to our employees trying to manage these lands," Tina J. Terrell, a Forest Service supervisor told a House Appropriations subcommittee last month.

She said law-enforcement personnel have been assaulted, threatened with weapons and shot at, and their vehicles have been rammed by cross-border violators. Because of the remoteness of the area, she said, timely assistance from other law-enforcement agencies is not always possible, and communications limitations and active interference with radio frequencies in Mexico create additional safety risks.

"Even normal enforcement duties bring our officers in regular contact with cross-border violators," she said. "Our officers risk their lives every day to enforce the law in these remote federally managed lands."

The Coronado National Forest is not the only area along the border being targeted for wildfires. Other blazes also have been set, including two this month near the San Luis, Ariz., port of entry as the result of Molotov cocktails -- one of which barely missed a Border Patrol agent.

Authorities said agents are being targeted by illegal aliens and their smugglers for rock attacks -- including grapefruit-size rocks wrapped in rags, dipped in gasoline and set on fire.

"As larger areas of the border come under operational control, we can expect violence to increase as smuggling operations can no longer operate with impunity and do not have unfettered access to the border for their criminal activities," Border Patrol Chief David V. Aguilar told a Homeland Security subcommittee this year.

"This explosion of aggression is an indicator how desperate and angry drug and human traffickers are at the increasing disruption of their smuggling routes," he said.