

This article is reprinted by permission from The San Francisco Chronicle, February 13, 1995.

Drugs Flowing Freely At Mexican Border

By H. G. Reza

San Diego, CA — The amount of cocaine seized from Mexican trucks and cargo at the border plummeted last year, as U.S. Customs Service officials pressed on with a program to promote trade by letting most commercial cargo enter the United States without inspection.

Not a single pound of cocaine was confiscated from more than 2 million trucks that passed through three of the busiest entry points along the Southwest border, where federal officials say most of the drug enters the country.

Of the 62,000 pounds of cocaine that customs agents seized from commercial cargo nationwide, less than a ton, or 3.2 percent, was taken from shipments along the border.

One reason for the sharp decline in seizures is that customs officials appear to be doing a poor job of identifying and inspecting those trucks and cargo containers being used for drug smuggling, according to an internal report dated December 13.

Officials say liberalized importing procedures have dramatically increased the number of trucks crossing the border from Mexico, producing trade benefits for both countries. And now the Customs Service also is considering new measures to speed up the entry of air and auto travelers into the United States.

Since last summer, federal authorities have been looking into allegations that corrupt customs officials and inspectors are tipping smugglers that certain shipments and vehicles have been targeted for narcotics inspections.

Sources said investigators also are examining allegations that:

- Some inspectors and officials in San Diego were bribed by Mexican drug rings to remove intelligence information from U.S. Customs computers.

- Inspectors and officials in the Long Beach area were bribed to allow drugs from Mexico and contraband, including AK-47 rifles and ammunition from China, to be smuggled into the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles in ship containers.

Sources also said importers allegedly were charged up to \$425 per container for hundreds of examinations that were never done.

In interviews, Justice Department officials declined to confirm or deny the existence of the investigations.

In 1986, Customs began a "facilitation" policy to speed up the shipment of cargo from Canada, and the program was expanded to the Mexican border in recent years.

"One reason for the sharp decline in seizures [of cocaine] is that customs officials appear to be doing a poor job of identifying and inspecting those trucks and cargo containers being used for drug smuggling."

Former Customs Commissioner William Von Raab, who helped establish the program on the Canadian border, said he was "shocked" when it later was used on the Mexican border.

"It's terrible. [This] was developed to be used at a border with the highest level of integrity and lowest level of risk," Von Raab said. "I certainly would never have deployed it at the Mexican border." ■