

Record drug seizures on US-Mexico border

More US enforcement is one reason. But shipments from cartels may also be rising.

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Phoenix - Seizures of illegal drugs – from marijuana to heroin – are on the rise along the US-Mexican border again this year, breaking the previous record for major busts set just last year.

"We're overwhelmed with marijuana," says Anthony Coulson, assistant special agent in charge of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Tucson. "We passed last year's record about two months ago."

Marijuana is the most-seized drug, followed by cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin, Mr. Coulson says. "All of them are trending up."

The jump in drug seizures could be a result of tighter borders – from more border patrol agents to new technology at ports of entry – and newly established checkpoints within the United States. But the increase could also mean that more drugs are being shipped across the border – possibly because Mexico has had a good growing season, much as Afghanistan did in producing record numbers of opium poppies this year. Or it could be because two drug cartels apparently formed an alliance to thwart a crackdown by Mexico's government and are now shipping more drugs to the north.

According to US Customs and Border Protection figures, which include only amounts that CBP agents seize, 1.7 million pounds of marijuana were seized along the US border with Mexico so far this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. A little more than half that amount was seized in Arizona. The previous record, for all of fiscal 2006, was about 1.3 million pounds.

DEA figures, which include drugs that all law-enforcement agencies working in the state take in, are even higher. At the end of August, with one month left in the fiscal year, federal, state, and local law-enforcement agencies in Arizona had already confiscated 1.1 million pounds of marijuana coming across the Mexico border. In all of fiscal 2006, officers intercepted 885,573 pounds of marijuana crossing the Mexico-Arizona border.

"Whether they're trying to push more through or we're better at seizing dope is still a question we all have," Coulson says. "We use it as an indicator, although a poor one, that there's an increase in trafficking."

That makes sense to Dawn McLaren, a research economist at Arizona State University in Tempe who tracks cross-border issues. The underground economy works much like the formal economy, she says. "If it's a good year for crops, they have more to export to the US," she says.

Moreover, if the drugs are more potent, American demand for drugs grows.

"Part of the reason for the methamphetamine problem these days is that the meth on the street is better, or more pure, so there are a lot more people becoming addicted," says Professor McLaren.

"The production side is one of the variables" for increased shipments into the US and more law-enforcement seizures, says Nestor Rodriguez, an expert on cross-border issues at the University of Houston. "But there's a host of variables. There's the relationship between gangs and cartels that control the movement [of drugs], and then of course enforcement on the US side."

Most officials and experts agree that US enforcement has increased. There are more border patrol agents now and their numbers continue to grow. X-ray machines, sensors, and canine units have been added to all ports of entry between Mexico and the US. More checkpoints have been set up in the interior US, not far from the border. All have contributed to more seizures of drugs, Coulson says.

But he, like other officials and experts, say drug trafficking is a cyclical business, and when one side sets up a new plan, the other side adapts. For example, soon after Felipe Calderón became Mexico's president in December, he sent thousands of troops to the border to crack down on the cartels trafficking in drugs. In addition, he extradited a number of alleged cartel members – including some leaders – to the US for prosecution.

This, in turn, led to a sort of war between the cartels for control of the lucrative production, manufacturing, and trafficking routes into the US. That chaos among the cartels stemmed the tide of drugs for a while. But in late May, reportedly, two cartels – the Gulf and the Sinaloa – formed an alliance to thwart Mr. Calderón's crackdown and to create a more stable pipeline for trafficking drugs into the US.

"We are concerned that the reported peace agreement between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels is bad news for us," says Coulson. "We expect an increase in trafficking through this corridor based on that alliance or agreement to share this corridor."

But Coulson says the various government agencies working to stem the flow of drugs are making progress. For one thing, he says, they continue to do better at sharing information and that is leading to quicker results.

"We are certainly doing a much better job at seizing the dope that is out there," Coulson says.

