

A Federal Program to Ease Congestion at Border Crossings

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Partly as a result of increased traffic after the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect and because of a post-9/11 security buildup, the time it takes to cross into Laredo from Mexico is typically several hours.

But local governments have begun to sort out details of a new program aimed at reducing long backups. Under the plan, local governments will be able to request extra staffing at border choke points from the federal customs agency. They would then reimburse the federal government for extra services provided.

Four of the five ports chosen for the program are in Texas: the South Texas Assets Consortium, which includes international bridges in Laredo as well as Cameron County, McAllen, Pharr and Rio Grande City; international bridges in El Paso; George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston; and Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

Proponents say the local and federal partnerships will benefit Texas' growing trade with Mexico. In 2012, more than \$229 billion in trade passed through the Laredo customs district, up from \$207 billion the previous year. In the El Paso district, trade was \$86 billion, up from \$78.1 billion a year earlier, according to WorldCity, which tracks global trade patterns.

Under the program, local governments can create port staffing proposals tailored to their needs, and customs officials can then assign agents to satisfy the proposals.

"Each individual will have an opportunity to do what's best for their community," said Sam Vale, the president of South Texas Assets Consortium.

"A decision will have to be made on a case-by-case basis," Mr. Vale said. "That's the way you enter this game — you start with something, and that's the only thing that's clear."

A proposal by the City of El Paso, for instance, will make seasonal adjustments for the number of agents in pedestrian and passenger vehicle lanes, according to information the city sent to Thomas S. Winkowski, the acting federal customs commissioner.

Mr. Vale said the program was a way to increase security for a seasonal events. For example, he said, during a winter celebration that Nuevo Laredo and Laredo stage together, Laredo could submit a proposal for increased staffing to handle the larger numbers of people crossing the border.

Laredo could decide to use sales tax revenue to pay for three additional lanes based on an overtime rate, Mr. Vale said. "So they would send a request to C.B.P. asking for that," he said. "If they agree, they would sign a work order number, then they will deliver the services."

Adjustments could be negotiated for bus lines or commercial vehicles that crossed during off-peak hours, he said.

United States Representative Henry Cuellar, Democrat of Laredo, said that in its early stages, the program would include only financing for overtime pay. Mr. Cuellar was part of a bipartisan Congressional group that sponsored the new program.

Similar arrangements are in place at several airports across the country, he said. Under the User Fee Airport Program, an airport can ask the customs agency for help in processing aircraft entering the United States from abroad. Airports in Addison, Dallas, Fort Worth, Harlingen, McKinney, Midland, San Antonio and Sugar Land are already enrolled and reimburse customs for the cost of the service.

The pilot program “is only service, not for infrastructure,” Mr. Cuellar said. “It’s been done in the past. The private sector can stand their ground.”

Mr. Cuellar said four of the five sites chosen for the program are in Texas because the people who run them “know what they’re doing.” But others said that the government was playing favorites.

“We don’t need the government picking winners and losers,” Lance Jungmeyer, the president of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas, based in Nogales, Ariz., said in a statement. “What we need is recognition that security at our southwestern ports of entry also entails economic security.”

But Mr. Vale said the program should be viewed as a benefit to consumers and travelers.

“Is that picking a winner or loser, or is that good public policy — to maximize the locations where you can export your products?” he said.

Mr. Cuellar acknowledged that private sector groups had raised concerns, but he said those fears were overblown.

Oversight, he said, “is service overtime only. If air cargo can do it, and they are big boys that handle themselves, then certainly land ports can handle themselves.”

The program was in the federal appropriations bill signed in March and was proposed as part of the Cross-Border Trade Enhancement Act of 2013, a bipartisan effort by United States Representatives Cuellar; Michael McCaul, Republican of Austin; Pete Gallego, Democrat of Alpine; Filemon Vela, Democrat of Brownsville; Blake Farenthold, Republican of Corpus Christi; and Beto O’Rourke, Democrat of El Paso. Senator John Cornyn filed a companion bill.

Mr. Cuellar said the House of Representatives had already passed a measure approving 1,600 more customs agents, which could mean that the pilot program will be only a stopgap measure.

He dismissed assertions that the federal government was skirting its responsibility and leaving staffing to local entities.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/16/us/a-federal-program-to-ease-congestion-at-border-crossings.html>