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As U.S. Plugs Border in Arizona, Crossings Shift to South Texas

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WASHINGTON — A surge in migrant traffic across the Southwest border into Texas has resulted in a milestone: the front line of the battle against illegal crossings from Mexico has shifted for the first time in over a decade away from Arizona to the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas.

This shift has intensified a bitter debate under way in the Senate over whether the border is secure enough now, or ever will be, to move ahead with legislation that could give legal status to millions of illegal immigrants already here.

On Monday, the Senate was scheduled to resume a long series of votes on an [immigration](#) bill that is promising to end a cycle — playing out since the early 1990s — in which each time the [Border Patrol](#) cracks down in one enforcement zone along the border, migrants move to another.

Now the Rio Grande Valley has displaced the Tucson enforcement zone as the hot spot, with makeshift rafts crossing the river in increasing numbers, high-speed car chases occurring along rural roads and a growing number of [dead bodies](#) turning up on ranchers' land, according to local officials.

“There is just so much happening at the same time — it is overwhelming,” said Benny Martinez, the chief deputy in the Sheriff's Department of Brooks County, Tex., 70 miles north of the border, where smugglers have been dropping off carloads of immigrants who have made it past Border Patrol checkpoints.

The increase in Texas is taking place even as the Obama administration says it has achieved unprecedented control over the border with Mexico. The administration, President Obama [said last week](#), has “put border security in place,” with illegal crossings “near their lowest level in decades.”

Apprehensions at the Mexican border — the single best indicator of illegal traffic — are still far below their peak: there were [356,873 last year](#), compared with 1.6 million in 2000.

But after nearly a decade of steady declines, the count has started to rise again over the past year, driven by the rise in the southern tip of Texas, where the numbers so far this fiscal year are up 55 percent. Since October, 94,305 individuals have been apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley alone, topping the count in Tucson for the first time since 1993.

Critics of the Senate legislation, including Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas, point to the influx in the Rio Grande Valley enforcement zone as proof that the bill must explicitly

mandate “full operational control” of the border within a decade before any immigrants who were once here illegally could be allowed to proceed toward citizenship.

“If we don’t guarantee to the American people that we actually are going to get serious about stopping the flow of people illegally crossing our Southwestern border,” Mr. Cornyn said last week on the Senate floor, “I think we guarantee the failure of bipartisan immigration reform.”

Supporters of the bill say the surge in Texas is small compared with the steep overall decline in recent years, and the Senate legislation, while not formally mandating control all along the Mexican border, would provide at least \$4.5 billion over five years for enforcement tools to help finish the job — a significant improvement that would come after two years of budget cutting.

“I have been on the border in Arizona for the last 30 years,” Senator John McCain, a Republican from that state who is one of the eight authors of the overhaul bill, said during the debate last week. “To somehow say there have not been significant advancements in border security defies the facts.”

The homeland security secretary, Janet Napolitano, acknowledged to a Senate committee this spring that in South Texas, “we have a problem there right now which we are fixing.”

The chief of the Border Patrol, Michael J. Fisher, said in an interview that he had begun last year to shift agents and surveillance equipment to the region, anticipating that an enforcement campaign in Tucson would push the illegal flow toward Texas. He said the patrol had sought to build up in Texas without diminishing its effort in Arizona.

“We did it smartly,” Mr. Fisher said. “We wanted to maintain some discipline and not move our resources from our primary focus in Arizona.”

Even though more planes and helicopters have been sent to the Rio Grande area, the effort has been slowed considerably by recent [federal budget](#) cuts, which have created severe fuel shortages and other complications that have at times grounded border aircraft. Agents have also had to double up in patrol vehicles, or have been ordered to sit in their vehicles without driving. Several parts of the border, like one 25-mile stretch west of McAllen, are at times not being watched, so the number of migrants who cross from Mexico without getting caught is surging, too, three agents said in interviews last week.

“It’s really demoralizing because there’s so much traffic passing through here and we can’t do anything about it,” one agent said Friday while on patrol, asking that his name not be used because he was not authorized to speak publicly. “And when you try to do something and they won’t let you do it,” he added, having been ordered during recent shifts not to drive his truck, “it’s just really demoralizing.”

Corruption has also been a problem: two Homeland Security auditors, until recently based in McAllen, were [indicted in April](#) on charges that they falsified documents when they were supposed to be investigating a string of cases in which Border Patrol agents had been helping smuggle illegal immigrants and drugs into the United States.

Mike Salinas, an alderman in La Joya, Tex., a tiny city on the Rio Grande, said border agents there were frequently outnumbered. Last week, a single agent tried to round up a group of 20, most of whom he watched scatter and get away.

“People are just crossing without fear,” Mr. Salinas said, recalling crowds right in his backyard in recent weeks.

The holding cells at the McAllen Border Patrol station are often filled beyond capacity, and dozens of migrants are [temporarily held in a truck garage](#). As many as 50 adults are detained for up to a week in a single holding area, with no shower, agents said.

A Homeland Security spokesman in Washington acknowledged that fuel shortages and overcrowding had been a problem, and he said the agency was working to distribute migrants it apprehended among different area stations.

The surge in South Texas is [driven mostly by immigrants originating not from Mexico](#) but from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, officials said. The Mexican border city of Reynosa is the end of a railway that begins in southern Mexico, and many migrants ride the roofs of freight trains to reach the United States.

Scholars who study migration say [surveys show](#) that it is most unlikely the migrants have been spurred by news that Congress is considering legalization for illegal immigrants already here. Tom K. Wong, a political science professor at the University of California, San Diego, said other factors appeared to be driving them.

“You see this uptick at the same time when the U.S. economy as a whole is also improving,” Mr. Wong said. Researchers said criminal violence in Central America was also a factor in the surge, which began more than a year ago, before the debate in Washington started.

The hundreds of miles of border defined by the Rio Grande are difficult to patrol, with citrus groves, dense fields of rippling sugar cane and thickets of mesquite trees that make it impenetrable to the long-range surveillance cameras affixed to tall towers, which have been effective in parts of Arizona. The river’s winding course and soggy terrain — as well as the potential for flooding — make building fences impractical in certain places.

Late last year, the Rio Grande Valley had [2,546 Border Patrol agents](#), up from 1,484 a decade earlier. Most new graduates of the Border Patrol Academy are being sent to the Rio Grande Valley, said Mr. Fisher, the Border Patrol chief. Agents have received surplus equipment from the Department of Defense, like night vision goggles, while they wait for money to buy their own gear.

Representative Henry Cuellar, a Democrat who represents part of the region, said the [Homeland Security Department](#) should have acted sooner. “They haven’t been nimble enough,” he said. “They would have been in a much better situation if they were playing offense instead of defense.”

The Senate bill would authorize spending on sophisticated mobile surveillance trucks, additional fencing and more border agents, advocates of the measure noted. They said other enforcement tools in the bill, like a mandate that all employers verify the work authorization of new hires, were needed to help eliminate magnets for migrants.

Mr. Fisher said he expected more fluctuations in illegal border crossings as enforcement expanded. “Across the Southwest border you always are going to have one location — right now it is Rio Grande Valley — where the traffic is rising,” he said.

Mr. Martinez, the chief deputy sheriff in Brooks County, said that cycle was worrisome to local residents. “This is a humanitarian issue,” he said. “People are dying right out on the land here.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/us/as-us-plugs-border-in-arizona-crossings-shift-to-south-texas.html>