

Associated Press

Federal prosecution of immigrants soared in spring

By Garance Burke

July 16, 2010

Federal prosecutions of immigrants soared to new levels this spring, as the Obama administration continued an aggressive enforcement strategy championed under President George W. Bush, according to a new study released Thursday.

The 4,145 cases referred to federal prosecutors in March and April was the largest number for any two-month stretch since the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency was created five years ago, the Syracuse University-based Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse found. They ranged from misdemeanor illegal entry to prosecutions of immigrants with criminal records.

The government's heavy focus on immigration investigations already is creating a heavy burden for the swamped courts along the U.S.-Mexico border, whose judges handle hundreds more cases than most of their counterparts in the rest of the country.

Federal authorities claim that workload would grow if Arizona's controversial new immigration law were implemented. The new law requires police, while enforcing other laws, to check the immigration status of anyone they have a reasonable suspicion is in the country illegally. It will take effect July 29 unless blocked by a court.

"People already are working 10- or 12-hour days and on weekends to just meet the caseload," said Matt Dykman, a U.S. District Court clerk for the District of New Mexico, where the percentage of cases referred by Customs and Border Patrol increased by 54 percent from February to April this year. "It's not an eight-hour day, because you have to process them and get them in court for that detention hearing."

Some of the increase may be due to seasonal upticks in the flow of migrants, who often tend to cross the border in time for the summer harvest or other temporary work, Dykman said. Hundreds of acres of fruit and vegetable crops are ripening in California's Central Valley, for instance, where farm laborers flock in the warm months seeking jobs picking and harvesting.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees both investigative agencies, did not immediately respond to a request for comment on TRAC's findings.

The nonprofit academic research group obtained the latest figures from the Department of Justice under the Freedom of Information Act. That agency also declined to comment on the findings.

U.S. Attorneys along the southwest border, from Texas to California, handle the bulk of cases referred by the border patrol.

Department of Homeland Security figures show that the number of illegal immigrants in the country has fallen in recent years. As of January 2009, an estimated 10.8 million people were in the country illegally, 1 million less than the 2007 peak, according to DHS.

At the same time, deportations have been increasing, climbing from 185,944 in 2007 to 387,790 last year.