

**Statement of Sheriff Raymond Loera
Imperial County, California**

**“Securing the Border: Progress at the Local Level”
April 7, 2011**

Issues:

The Imperial County Sheriff’s Office (ICSO) is located in Imperial County, CA, which extends 4,597 square miles, bordering Baja California, Mexico; Yuma County, Arizona and San Diego County, California. The county contains 7 incorporated cities and 10 unincorporated cities. The population is estimated at 172,672. There are 3 ports of entry in Imperial County. Two of the ports of entry are in Calexico and the third one is in Andrade, California. Mexicali, Mexico is Calexico, California’s sister city to the south.

Imperial County is a rural, agricultural community. The current unemployment rate is 24.7 per cent. A review of local crime statistics indicated that crime levels remain stable, though larceny, burglaries and assaults are high.

The Mexicali-Imperial Valley corridor is a significant, lucrative drug smuggling corridor. The Customs and Border Protection Agency reports that during FY2010, the Calexico ports of entry led with the most cocaine seized, as compared to seizures at other ports of entry along the southwest border. For FY2011, this trend continues and for FY2011 the Calexico ports of entry also lead in crystal methamphetamine seizures along the southwest border.

STATISTICS

Seized by CBP (POES/Pounds)	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011 (through March)
Cocaine	7,348	6546	2,595
Marijuana	105,324	61,088	11,768
Methamphetamine	881	1,186	203
Heroin	42	237	3
Currency	\$3,736,614	\$4,353,768	\$1,962,921

Drug seizures between the ports and at the United States Border Patrol (USBP) Checkpoints increased from FY2009 to FY2010, with the exception of marijuana. However, during the first 6 months of FY2011, marijuana totals exceeded what was seized in FY2010. This is due to increased manpower of the USBP, remote video surveillance systems, four USBP Checkpoints and an increase in seizures from ultralight smuggling activity. In the past, the Imperial Sand Dunes were the favored location for smuggling marijuana, from Mexico into the United States. Once successfully in the United States, load drivers utilized Interstate 8 to further transport the load. The Imperial Sand Dunes was the location where USBP Agent Robert Rosas was killed by drug smugglers in July 2008.

STATISTICS

Seized by USBP (Pounds)	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011 (through 3/15/11)
Cocaine	174	1383	131
Marijuana	17,418	10,882	12,930
Methamphetamine	37	119	92
Heroin	25	67	26
Currency	\$25,037	\$720,403	\$223,162

Traffickers must transport their drugs from Mexico into the United States, despite increased border security and counterdrug efforts. They have resorted to using tunnels and ultralight aircraft to get their drugs into this country. Since September 2003, 11 tunnels have been discovered in the Imperial Valley border area, with the latest one discovered on March 6, 2011. Ultralights are used to air drop marijuana loads into agricultural areas, in Imperial Valley, where couriers await to retrieve the loads. Since December 2010, there have been 27 ultralight incursions into Imperial Valley, resulting in 10 seizures totaling approximately 3,090 pounds of marijuana. To date, only marijuana has been seized from the ultralights in this area.

Mexicali has not experienced the degree of violence reported in other areas along the border, such as Tijuana and Juarez. Intelligence has indicated for some time that Mexicali is a neutral zone, a safe haven, due to the plaza having been controlled for several years by the Joaquin “Chapo” Guzman-Loera drug trafficking organization (DTO).

Recently, there are indications that this is changing. This is evidenced by the killing of five individuals on January 24, 2011 at La Resaca Bar in Mexicali, Mexico. Intelligence reflects that the Beltran-Leyva organization may be vying for the control of the Mexicali Plaza. If this is true, an escalation in violence in Mexicali is expected, as rival drug cartels seek to win over the Plaza. Other intelligence sources have also indicated that violence will be escalating in Mexicali. The degree to which this will impact Imperial County is an unknown factor at this time.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), weapon smuggling is also an issue in the Imperial Valley. The “Imperial County Corridor” serves as a major pipeline of firearms for organized crime entities operating in Northwestern Mexico and members of the Sinaloa Cartel. The points of entry into Mexico for this corridor are primarily through U.S. Ports of Entry in Andrade, CA and Calexico, CA. Trends and intelligence indicate firearms are usually purchased in neighboring source states and trafficked into Imperial County, CA, where they are held in suspected stash houses, disassembled and trafficked into Mexico, in various appliances and furniture. Firearm traffickers have also requested military grade weaponry, such as grenade launchers, high explosive rounds, grenades and fully automatic firearms. Further, suspects have offered to trade illegal drugs for firearms. ATF has identified one specific operative demand for firearms within this corridor which consist of 7.62mm rifles, 5.56mm rifles and other high-caliber firearms that will be used to support criminal organizations or gangs associated with narcotics trafficking and other serious violent crime.

Alien smuggling is also a problem along this portion of the border. Out of the nine United States Border Patrol sectors, the El Centro sector ranked fifth in Illegal Alien Apprehensions. During FY09, 33,521 aliens were apprehended in this area and 32,562 during FY10. This is a huge decrease as compared to FY1999, when 225,279 illegal aliens were apprehended. Illegal alien apprehensions along the southwest border have decreased across the board. This may be due to increases in manpower by USBP, improved equipment and technology, border fences, as well as the state of the economy.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that kidnappings, excluding parental/custody situations, are rare in this area, on the United States side of the border. Rather, the victim is usually involved in drug trafficking and the captors wait in Mexico or lure the person into Mexico, where the kidnapping takes place. These cases generally go unreported.

Efforts to combat the threat:

The ICSO is part of the Imperial Valley Drug Coalition (IVDC), comprised of 20 participating law enforcement agencies. The IVDC board oversees the Imperial Valley Law Enforcement Coordination Center (IVLECC), a multiagency environment supporting this High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) initiative. This HIDTA is administered by the Southern California HIDTA, called the California Border Alliance Group. These agencies communicate on a regular basis, intelligence is routinely shared and the agencies come together to support various operations.

The IVLECC specifically houses the following initiatives: the Intelligence Support Unit, the Street Interdiction Team, the Imperial County Narcotics Task Force, Major Mexican Traffickers and the California Department of Justice's Major Narcotics and Violence Team (formerly known as BIT). Although not currently housed at the IVLECC, the IVLECC supports the Border Enforcement Security Team (BEST) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Safe Street Task Force, which are also HIDTA initiatives. These task forces and the Intelligence Support Unit are made up of various state, local and federal agents, officers and analysts, to include Deputies from the ICSO. Four Deputy District Attorney's are also located at the IVLECC.

The Intelligence Unit is comprised nine Intelligence Analysts, which provide case support, operational, tactical, and strategic intelligence services for Imperial County law enforcement.

ATF established an office within Imperial County in 2009, as a component of ATF's Southwest Border Strategy, which includes both an International Strategic Component and a Domestic Strategic Component. The Domestic Component is known as Project Gunrunner and is the primary focus of ATF El Centro's efforts within Imperial County. ATF El Centro partnered with the California Department of Justice (DOJ) Bureau of Firearms (BOF) in 2010, as members of a Firearms Trafficking Task Force to implement the domestic component. Given Imperial Valley's location along the U.S. Border, both components are utilized. The international component primarily deals with firearms tracing and reporting by Mexican counterparts in Mexicali and Algodones, Baja California, Mexico. Once firearms are encountered and recovered by Mexican authorities, the information is then provided to ATF for tracing.

Since the inception of the Firearms Trafficking Task Force, it has generated more than sixty Southwest Border firearms trafficking interdiction investigations that target straw purchasers and firearms traffickers, in known trafficking corridors, such as Imperial County. The task force also concentrates its efforts on gun shows with known firearms trafficking activities and targeting previously identified firearm traffickers that are trafficking firearms from source states, such as Arizona and Nevada, into Imperial County, California and through to Mexico.

The BEST team, a Homeland Security Investigations-(HSI/ formerly known as ICE) led team, targets the use of tunnels to smuggle drugs as well as ultralight incursions and southbound weapons. In response to the ultralight threat, an ad hoc multiagency group was formed, with oversight by the BEST Executive Board.

Individual cases are supported by the Intelligence Unit, as well as various operations, such as Operation Aftershock, where the various participating agencies came together in May 2010 and saturated the county with law enforcement, in an effort to stave off potential violence from Mexico, as it has filtered into other parts of the country.

Another example where member agencies came together was in support of Operation United Force in November 2010, an HSI-led operation reflecting a show of force and officer presence, in response to threats against HSI agents and other federal agents and state officers.

Most recently in February 2011, HSI led Operation Gadsden, as part of Operation Fallen Hero, again a multiagency operation focused on the Ports of Entry in Imperial County, this time in response to the murder of HSI agent Jaime Zapata in Mexico.

In summary, Imperial County is a significant drug smuggling corridor and poses a potential security threat to Imperial County, as rival DTOs seek to take over the Mexicali Plaza. Violence is expected to escalate in Mexicali. The Mexican DTOs have adjusted their smuggling methods to counteract law enforcement efforts, such as the utilization of tunnels and ultralights. High unemployment in Imperial County and the familial ties between residents of Mexicali and residents of Imperial County makes the DTO's chances of success in recruiting individuals to join in drug trafficking activities and other crimes, very high; making law enforcement's job extremely challenging. The sharing of intelligence between agencies is critical in order to plan for and tackle these challenges. In Imperial County the IVLECC is the primary resource to provide this service in support of state, local and federal agencies and serves as a hub for all agencies to come together.