Border Tunnels

Working to stop the construction of tunnels used to transport drugs across the U.S.–Mexico border
Dear Californian,

For years, smugglers have struggled to bypass our border checkpoints. Now they are changing tactics by tunneling beneath the border to evade U.S. enforcement agents. These tunnels are increasing in size, frequency and sophistication, which means more and more drugs are entering our country below our feet.

In 2006, I visited a sophisticated tunnel discovered by the multi-agency San Diego Tunnel Task Force, stretching from an abandoned warehouse near the southern border of California into Tijuana, Mexico.

The tunnel was 2,400 feet long – nearly a half-mile – the longest cross-border tunnel ever discovered. It reached more than nine stories below ground at its deepest point and had ample ventilation and groundwater drainage systems, cement flooring, lighting and a pulley system. Authorities seized over 4,200 pounds of marijuana in the tunnel. Later, the operation was attributed to the Arellano Felix drug-trafficking organization.

Tunnels like this are being used to transport narcotics from Mexico into the United States, but could also be used to smuggle weapons and people. Tunnels can range from shallow dirt crawlways to sophisticated concrete structures with shoring, ventilation and electricity. One recent tunnel even included a makeshift elevator.

After seeing the tunnel in San Diego, I introduced the Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2006, which became law the next year. The bill criminalized the construction, financing or use of an unauthorized tunnel into the United States. Unfortunately, criminals are finding ways to get around the law.

In 2011, I introduced a new bill to enhance the law and provide law enforcement and prosecutors additional tools to locate tunnels, identify criminals and punish those responsible.

Underground tunnels present a serious national security threat, and I will continue to work with California law enforcement, prosecutors and our Mexican counterparts to prevent their construction.

Sincerely,

Senator Dianne Feinstein
Finding Tunnels

In recent years, a crackdown on drug smugglers in Mexico and tighter U.S. border security above ground has led to dramatic increases in the use and sophistication of tunnels under the border.

A tunnel found in San Diego in November 2011 had a hydraulically controlled steel door, elevator and electric rail tracks. This tunnel is the most sophisticated cross-border tunnel discovered to date and the second longest. It ranks as both the largest drug seizure associated with a border tunnel and one of the largest drug seizures in U.S. history, with approximately 32 tons of marijuana found. It is thought to have been built by the Sinaloa drug-trafficking organization, which operates in Mexico along the border area where the bulk of subterranean passages are discovered.

This is no longer a pick-and-shovel operation. Some tunnels look to have been made with equipment such as hydraulic lifts, elevators, generators and water pumps.

Anti-Tunneling Legislation

Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011

The first cross-border tunnel was discovered in May 1990 and the number of tunnels increased dramatically in 2001. According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an astonishing 152 tunnels were discovered between 2001 and 2011.

The Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011 builds on my 2006 Border Tunnel Prevention Act, which criminalized the construction or financing of unauthorized tunnels or subterranean passages across an international border. Permitting others to construct or use an unauthorized tunnel or subterranean passage on their land would also be considered a criminal offense.

The Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011 would further deter tunnel activities by providing enhanced investigative tools to law enforcement and increasing prosecutorial options. This would be done by:

- Making use, construction or financing of a border tunnel a conspiracy offense. This would punish the intent to engage in tunneling activity, even in cases where a tunnel was not fully constructed.
- Designating illegal tunneling as an offense eligible for wire interception.
- Defining border-tunnel activity as unlawful under existing forfeiture and money laundering provisions to allow authorities to seize assets in these cases.

The Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011 has a number of notification requirements that take effect no later than 18 months after the date of the enactment. Specifically, the bill:

- Encourages the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to continue outreach efforts to both private and government land owners and tenants in areas along the border between Mexico and the United States. People who live in these areas should be notified of tunnel laws and ways they can report suspicious activity.
- Requires DHS to report each year to Congress on cross-border tunnel construction and update Congress on the needs of the Department to effectively prevent, investigate and prosecute border-tunnel construction.
Drug Trafficking Organizations

Map depicting Areas of Dominant Influence

This map represents areas of dominant presence of Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). It is subject to change given the fluid nature of Mexican DTOs.

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)
Current as of May 2011

Questions or comments about this product are welcome and should be directed to DEA’s Strategic Intelligence Section at (202) 307-5442.
Senator Dianne Feinstein is chairman of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, commonly known as the Drug Caucus, which has oversight of U.S. and international counternarcotics policy. The Caucus’ seven bipartisan members work to combat international narcotics trafficking and reduce domestic drug abuse.

As chairman, Senator Feinstein is particularly interested in U.S. efforts to reduce drug trafficking and drug-related violence in Mexico and Afghanistan. The Caucus has held hearings on strategies to dismantle Mexican drug trafficking organizations, efforts to stop money laundering from the United States to Mexico, the proliferation of border tunnels along the Southwest border and the Taliban’s shift to drug trafficking in Afghanistan.

The Caucus has been particularly focused on the dangers of illegal drugs in U.S. communities. It has held hearings on how to stop methamphetamine production and abuse and the dangers of new synthetic drugs such as K2, Spice and bath salts.

Chairman Feinstein has authored a number of reports with her colleagues on how best to reduce the trafficking of illegal drugs and drug-related violence.

- “U.S. and Mexican Responses to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations” outlines key steps and initiatives to combat Mexico’s brutal drug trafficking organizations and reduce violence in the country, and offers Congress and the administration recommendations on how to jointly work with Mexico to stop drug trafficking.
- “Halting U.S. Firearms Trafficking to Mexico” urges Congress and the administration to strengthen firearms laws to stem drug-related violence, citing data that 70 percent of weapons recovered in Mexico and traced originated from the United States.
- “Responding to Violence in Central America” argues that Central America is at a dangerous crossroads and calls for security in the subregion to become a higher priority.
- “U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan” describes the Taliban’s shift to drug trafficking, a threat which cannot be ignored. Drug trafficking provides the terrorist organization with a lucrative source of financing that puts the U.S. mission in Afghanistan at risk. The report asserts that the drug problem in Afghanistan should not be ignored.

For more information visit: www.drugcaucus.senate.gov

What happens in Mexico directly effects the United States, and the reciprocal is also true. The United States provides counternarcotics assistance throughout the world, but our security partnership with Mexico is unique since we share a 1,969 mile border.

The drug trade has long been associated with violence, but the recent escalation has been unprecedented. Stopping this violence will take cooperation from those of us on both sides of the border.

Senators Feinstein and Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), co-chairs of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, authored a report outlining key steps and initiatives to combat Mexico’s brutal drug trafficking organizations and reduce violence in the country.

Senators Feinstein and Grassley meant for this report to act as a guide as authorities work to curb the drug trade and the violence associated with it. The report, “U.S. and Mexican Responses to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations,” made several recommendations (see next page) for the U.S. government.

2006 tunnel stretching across the U.S.-Mexico border
Pot-Smuggling Tunnels in Tijuana Grow More Elaborate

By Tim Johnson
McClatchy Newspapers — February 21, 2012

Tijuana — When smuggling goes smoothly for the marijuana division of the huge Sinaloa Cartel, cross-border deliveries unfold with clockwork precision.

Harvested marijuana arrives in plastic-wrapped bales to a depot hidden among the rundown warehouses on the Mexican side of the concrete U.S. border fence.

Once enough marijuana is collected, workers drop the vacuum-packed bales through shafts leading to the ever-more-elaborate tunnels that cut under the border through the clay-laden soil.

U.S. agents have been waging war against the tunnels for years, using a range of high-tech devices from ground-penetrating radar to seismic sensors to find and destroy them. But despite the efforts, drug smugglers continue to build the tunnels, often spending $1 million to dig a single pathway equipped with lighting, forced-air ventilation, water pumps, shoring on walls and hydraulic elevators.

Lately, new tunnels have included railways. The bales move on electric mining carts with hand throttles that roll up at 15 mph.

“A tunnel represents an incursion into the U.S., and it’s a national security event,” said José M. García, who oversees the federal multi-agency San Diego Tunnel Task Force.

The location of the tunnels helps explain why agents have such difficulty finding them. The area where the most advanced tunnels have been found is adjacent to the Tijuana international airport, where scores of planes take off and land daily. Nearby warehouses buzz with legitimate activity.

“All that noise from the airport is a great advantage to them,” said Victor Clark Alfaro, an anthropologist and human rights activist in Tijuana who also lectures at San Diego State University. “This border is perforated like an anthill.”

U.S. officials say they have found more than 160 tunnels in the stretch of Mexico that borders Arizona and California. In the past 15 months, U.S. agents have busted increasingly sophisticated tunnels.

García said that even with devices such as seismic sensors, a majority of tunnel boots came from tip-offs by informants or suspicious warehouse operators.

Big tunnels are thought to be the work of the Sinaloa Cartel, which has seized control of Tijuana from the local Arellano-Félix cartel after years of bloody conflict and is operating in tandem with remnants of the group.

Sinaloa operatives employ mining engineers and architects to help construct their tunnels, while keeping knowledge of locations to as few people as possible.

Experts on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force say “some tunnel excavators in Mexico are killed when the job is done to prevent them from spreading the word on the location,” Duffy told senators.

Marijuana growers are turning to ever-larger plantations to meet the capacity of bigger tunnels. Last July, soldiers found a 300-acre scrapfield and irrigated marijuana plantation near San Quintin, 50 miles south of Tijuana, which was four times larger than any such site that had been seized before. Eight months earlier, soldiers seized 148 tons — 134 metric tons — of pot in Tijuana, a record.

U.S. and Mexican agents say that tunnel digging, using pneumatic spades, generally is limited to teams of six or seven men. They live at the Tijuana site where the tunnel begins, and excavation is timed to conclude with the harvesting of marijuana crops in late summer and early autumn, so there’s little time for the tunnel to sit idle and be detected.

“The process is tedious,” Garcia said, involving working day and night and digging hundreds of feet along the shrub for removal.

But even with multimillion-dollar investments, Garcia said, the tunnel builders “reconnoiter that by making just one trip, given the value of the narcotics we’ve seized.”

Most sales of marijuana carry stickers, often fanciful images such as Donald Duck, Captain America, Budweiser or Homer Simpson. The stickers indicate ownership and destination, U.S. agents said.

Tunnel operatives make sure to recoup their investments first.

“They work the tunnels until they start making profit,” said Victor Clark Alfaro, an anthropologist and human rights activist in Tijuana who also lectures at San Diego State University.

“You can see the tunnels grow as they go,” Garcia said.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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