

Border Tunnels



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



Dear Californian:

For years, drug smugglers have struggled to bypass our border checkpoints. Now they are tunneling beneath the border to evade U.S. enforcement agents. These tunnels have increased significantly in size and sophistication, which means more and more drugs enter the country below our feet.

In 2006, I first 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 delved 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 one 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.

In response to these drug tunnels, I drafted legislation to criminalize the construction, financing or use of an unauthorized tunnel into the United States — both of my bills were signed into law. Unfortunately, while we've made progress, we still face obstacles in our mission to close these tunnels for good. For example, Mexico has refused to criminalize tunnel construction and does not permanently close them like we have on our side of the border.

Tunnels present a serious threat to our nation and I will continue to work with law enforcement, prosecutors and our Mexican counterparts to prevent their construction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Dianne Feinstein". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dianne" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Feinstein".

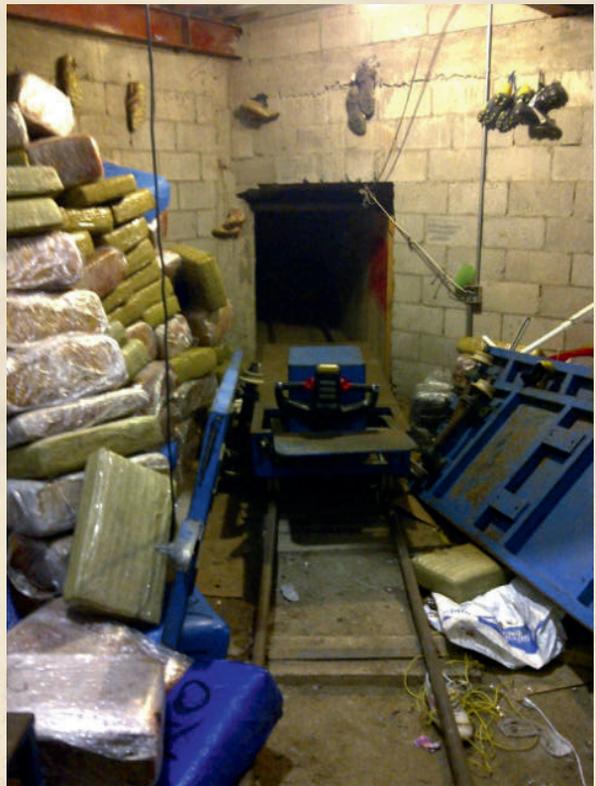
Senator Dianne Feinstein

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.

In April 2016, authorities discovered a tunnel in San Diego that stretched half a mile under the U.S.-Mexico border. The tunnel was equipped with a rail system, ventilation, lights, and a large elevator; authorities identified it as the longest tunnel ever unearthed in California. Federal agents seized more than a ton of cocaine and seven tons of marijuana, making it the largest cocaine seizure ever associated with a tunnel.

This is no longer a pick-and-shovel operation. Tunnels are now being made with equipment such as hydraulic lifts, elevators, generators and water pumps.



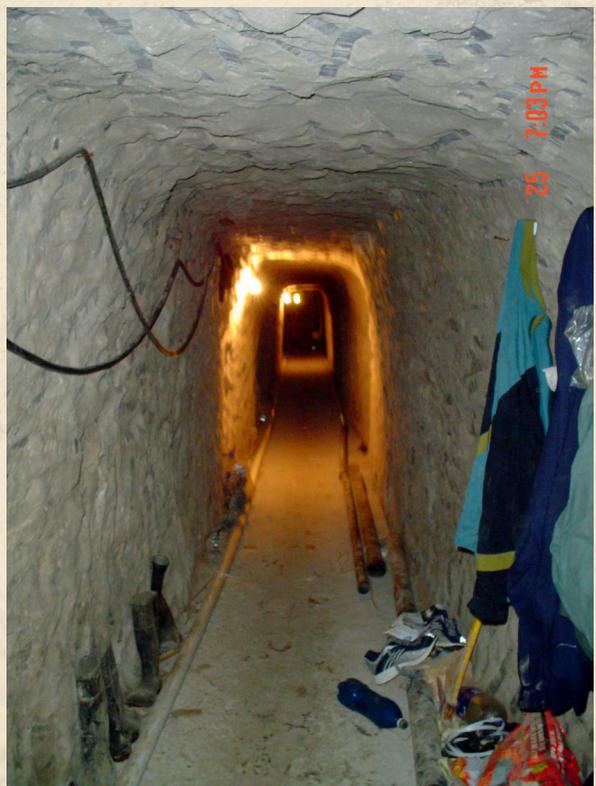
Tunnel with electric rail tracks

ANTI-TUNNELING LEGISLATION

Border Tunnel Prevention Act

The first cross-border tunnel was discovered in May 1990. Since then, according to Customs and Border Control, 200 illicit cross-border tunnels have been discovered in the United States. Seventy-one of these were located in California — nearly half included lights, ventilation, and rails to transport narcotics.

In 2012, the *Border Tunnel Prevention Act* was enacted. This law built on my 2006 *Border Tunnel Prevention Act*, which criminalized the construction or financing of unauthorized tunnels or subterranean passages across an international border. Further, the Act criminalized permitting others to construct or use an unauthorized tunnel or subterranean passage on their land.



"El Grande" tunnel discovered in 2006 in Otay Mesa



U.S. warehouse exit point of the massive Otay Mesa tunnel

The *Border Tunnel Prevention Act* provides enhanced investigative tools to law enforcement and increases prosecutorial options. The law deters tunneling activity and helps to catch smugglers by:

- Making the 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* also includes a number of notification provisions. Specifically, it:

- 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 that are vulnerable to tunnel construction. People that live in these areas should be notified of tunnel laws and provide with information to help them recognize and report suspicious activity.
- Requires DHS to provide an annual report to Congress on cross-border tunnel construction and the needs of the Department to effectively prevent, investigate and prosecute border tunnel construction.

US-Mexico Drug Tunnels Evolving Amid Increased Border Security

By Jean Guerrero
Wednesday, June 21, 2017

Under the corrugated steel plates that divide the U.S. and Mexico in Otay Mesa, dozens of clandestine cross-border tunnels slash through the soil.

As President Trump looks to build new barriers along the border, criminal organizations in Mexico are improving the tunnels they use to smuggle people and drugs under the border fence – making them smaller and maintaining a high level of sophistication, featuring electricity and railways.

Smuggling tunnels vary in shape and size, but generally fall under one of these three categories, according to U.S. Border Patrol:

–**Rudimentary tunnels**, or “gopher holes,” are cheaply made and stretch short distances, maybe 50 feet. They are used to smuggle humans or small quantities of drugs under the border.

–**Interconnecting tunnels** exploit existing municipal infrastructure, linking up with storm drains and sewer lines. They are used to smuggle humans and drugs under the border.

–**Sophisticated tunnels** can stretch for long distances (the longest ever found was equivalent to the length of eight football fields) and are often equipped with lighting,

electricity, ventilation, water pumps, railways and more. They are used to move large volumes of drugs under the border.

In San Diego, tunnels are usually sophisticated, partly because of the highly organized criminal organization operating in Baja California – the Sinaloa Cartel – as well as the characteristics of Otay Mesa, a neighborhood that exists on both sides of the border. In the U.S. and in Mexico, Otay Mesa is crowded with warehouses, providing numerous spaces to hide tunnel entry and exit points.

According to the U.S. Border Patrol, in the past three decades, 29 of the 62 sophisticated tunnels that have been found along the U.S.-Mexico border were in the San Diego sector. Meanwhile, of the 197 total tunnels discovered along the border, 62 were in the San Diego sector. These figures exclude about a hundred unfinished tunnels found on the Mexican side of the border.

Drug tunnels began to proliferate in response to increased border security, particularly border fence construction launched in the 1990s, according to U.S. and Mexican researchers.

“The more sophisticated our border infrastructure has become, the more the smugglers have upped their game,” said David

Shirk, director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego.

Shirk said cartels are going as far as consulting with top engineers in Europe to perfect their tunnel architecture.

“And they have every incentive to do so. If it costs a million dollars to make a tunnel like that, they can make that back on the first run,” he said.

Drug seizures in tunnels are often in the multi-million dollar range, which suggests that cartels are making hundreds of millions of dollars on these tunnels.

The Tunnel Rats Get To Work

Lance Lenoir is captain of Border Patrol’s five-person tunnel entry team, known as the Tunnel Rats. When a tunnel is discovered with an exit in the U.S., the Tunnel Rats get to work.

“What we do is assess the tunnel, characterize it, go in, pull out evidence, map it, get rid of it,” Lenoir said.

By “get rid of it,” Lenoir means they fill the tunnel with cement on the U.S. side of the border – what Border Patrol calls “remediation” of the tunnel. The tunnels often remain open on the Mexican side.

Lenoir said the sophisticated tunnels centered around San Diego are becoming narrower

and harder to detect – ranging anywhere from 36 inches to less than four feet in diameter.

So far, the most reliable method of detection has been what Lenoir called “good old-fashioned police work,” with officials pursuing leads from informants who notice suspicious jackhammer sounds, large piles of dirt, or people coming and going at unusual hours. But U.S. federal agencies are now seeking to improve tunnel detection technologies.

Tunnel Detection Technology Is “Lacking”

“We need to bring the technology piece. Right now, it’s lacking,” Lenoir said. “I mean we’re talking about a niche problem that doesn’t have any parallel to commercial or industry standard.”

Existing technology – ranging from ground-penetrating radar to sensors that detect changes in microgravity – gets thrown off by surface clutter and noise, and there is a lot of cross-border traffic in this area. Radio and electromagnetic interference is another problem. Heterogeneous geology along the U.S.-Mexico border – a mix of porous, sandy and rocky – also makes it hard to see what is underground.

Lenoir said he does not know if plans to expand the border fence will affect tunneling. But the cartels keep getting more creative in making tunnels, and he said he wants to make sure the U.S. gets more creative in finding them.

“You can’t go to Wal-Mart and buy those things – so that’s what we’re working on actively right now,” Lenoir said.

The Galvez Tunnel Remains

About 90 feet under Otay Mesa, footsteps from the Cross Border Xpress bridge that connects San Diego and Tijuana, lies a drug tunnel about six feet high and four feet wide, with lighting and ventilation.

It is called the Galvez Tunnel. Unlike most tunnels discovered in the U.S., this one was left partly open to train the Tunnel Rats. It used to have a rail system for transporting cocaine, marijuana and other drugs. U.S. investigators found the tunnel before it was finished.

On a recent Monday, the Tunnel Rats opened it up to give reporters a tour. Lenoir wore a tan shirt with an illustrated cartoon rat on the back.

“This is like the Cadillac of tunnels,” he said, placing a hand on the sandstone walls, which did not require shoring with cement because they were naturally stable.

Despite the tunnel’s sophistication, tool marks along the walls show it was made with a mere hammer drill, like most tunnels.

“Pure manual labor. Blood, sweat and tears,” Lenoir said.

Cartels Get Creative

Some of the most creative elements of drug tunnels involve the way cartels disguise the entry and exit points. The Galvez Tunnel is a good example of that creativity.

“This one in particular was hid under a bathroom floor that actually raised and lowered to get in and out. We’ve seen elevators, bonafide elevators with up and

down buttons, everything but the music,” Lenoir said.

For ventilation, criminal groups often utilize things like leaf blowers and floor dryers.

“My personal favorite is the bounce house blower,” Lenoir said. “Very ingenious.”

The creativity of the tunnels is consistent with Mexican drug cartels’ way of overcoming the border fence above-ground – using catapults, drones and ladders to get the drugs across, for example.

“The cartels are always trying to innovate and respond to challenges in exactly the same way that any other business does,” said Tom Wainwright, author of “Narconomics,” and Britain editor for *The Economist*. “The message seems to be that whatever technology is used on the U.S. side, the cartels are going to counter with technology of their own.”

Jose Manuel Valenzuela, an investigator for the Mexican border research institute El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, said he does not think tunnel detection technology will ever be good enough to prevent the problem.

If the U.S. and Mexican governments really want to stop drug tunnels, Valenzuela said, they need to chase the massive profits they generate – in the banks. He said that with existing regulatory regimes, banks are a blind spot for authorities on both sides of the border.

“That’s the large tunnel of the drug market – the banks,” he said. “Until we look at that perspective, we’ll keep talking about this game of cat and mouse.”

WORKING WITH MEXICO

Mexico is a major transit and source country for a variety of illicit drugs, including heroin, fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine. 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.

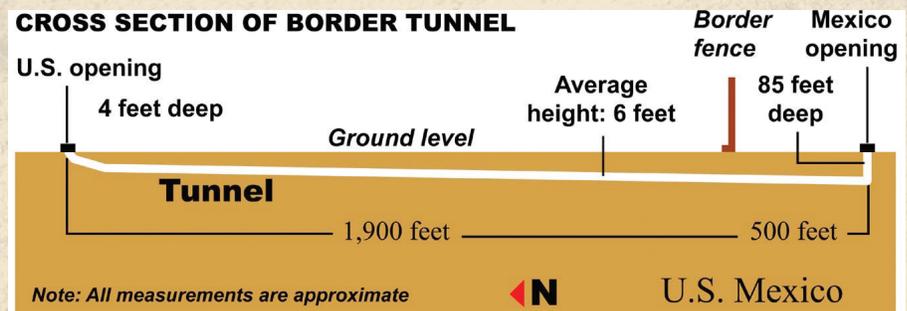
Senator Feinstein has consistently worked with the Mexican Government to address drug trafficking and cross-border tunnels. As cross-border tunnels are discovered in the United States, they are filled with a concrete-sand mixture and the entrance is capped at the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent reuse at a later date. However, tunnels that are discovered in Mexico are filled with loose gravel or trash that can be easily removed, leaving them susceptible to re-use. There are several examples of cross-border tunnels that have been reused.

While the Mexican Government prosecutes individuals who use cross-border tunnels for specific illegal acts, including narcotics trafficking, the acts of constructing or financing the construction of tunnels are not illegal in Mexico, as they are in the United States. As such, Senator Feinstein has encouraged the Mexican Government to criminalize the construction of cross-border tunnels and ensure their permanent and immediate remediation.

The drug trade has long been associated with violence, particularly in Mexico. The staggering increases in the production and trafficking of dangerous narcotics necessitates increased international cooperation and concrete action from those of us on both sides of the border.

Senators Dianne Feinstein and Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), co-chairs of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, previously 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 continue to work with the Department of State, Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, and a host of other U.S. agencies and foreign partners to curb the drug trade and the violence associated with it.



BORDER TUNNELS

Under Their Feet

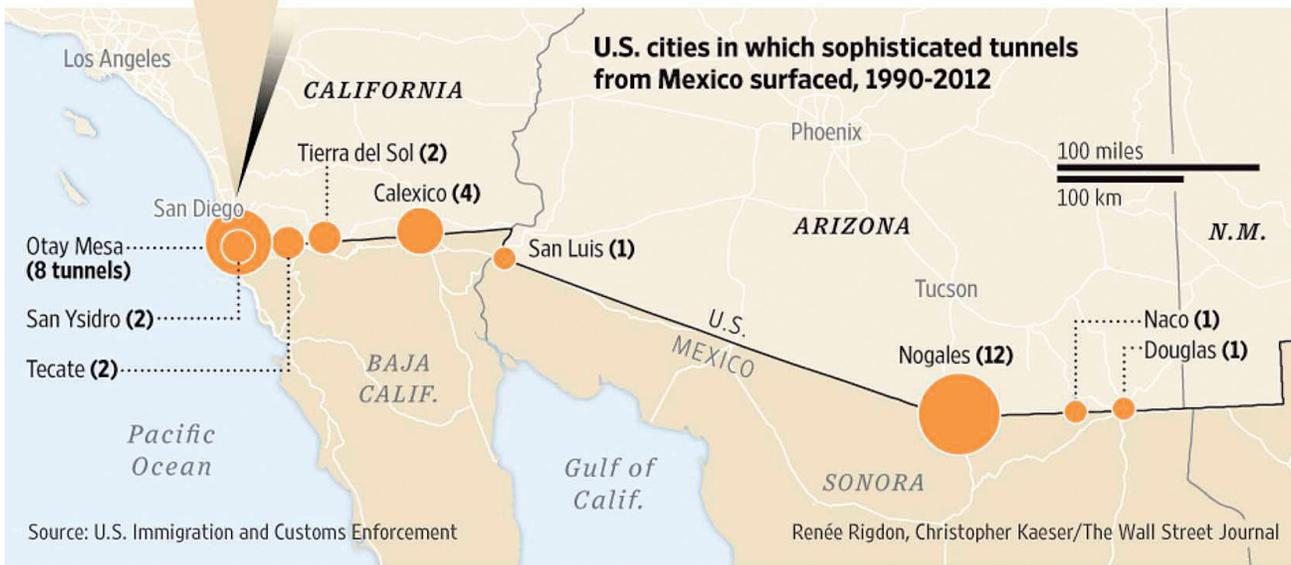
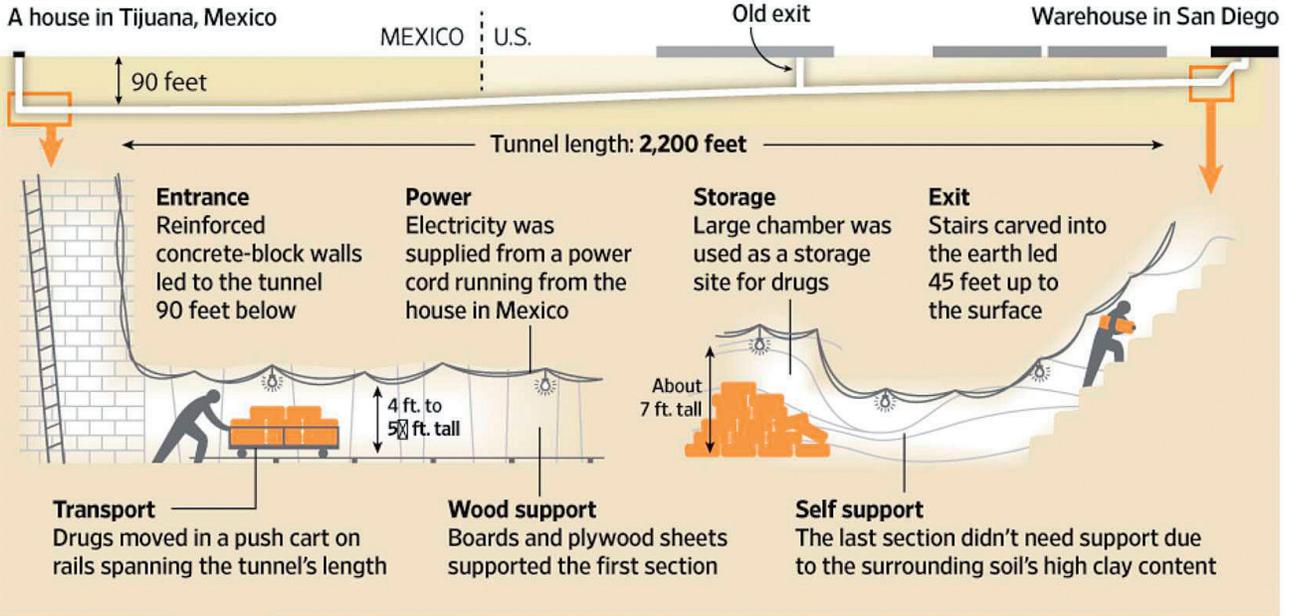
U.S. officials say the 2,200-foot long 'Marconi' tunnel—discovered in 2010—from Tijuana, Mexico, to San Diego's Otay Mesa neighborhood took more than a year to construct and was outfitted with electricity, rails and ventilation.

ENTRANCE

A house in Tijuana, Mexico

EXIT

Warehouse in San Diego



SENATE DRUG CAUCUS

Senator Dianne Feinstein is co-chair of the **Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control** which has oversight of U.S. and international counternarcotics policy. The caucus's seven bipartisan members work to combat international narcotics trafficking and reduce domestic drug abuse.

As co-chair, Senator Feinstein is particularly interested in U.S. efforts to reduce drug trafficking and drug-related violence in Latin America and Afghanistan and in preventing drug abuse and reducing their associated harms in the United States. The caucus recently held hearings on adapting U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Colombia and drug trafficking across the southwest border and oversight of U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Mexico.

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

- *Future U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Afghanistan* which examines U.S. efforts to combat the drug trade in Afghanistan and makes recommendations on how these can be improved going forward.
- *Eight Steps to Counter the Drug Trade in West Africa* outlines how the United States can combat the damage done by the drug trafficking to West African nations as well as how the United States can prevent terrorist groups like Hezbollah and the Colombian FARC from profiting from the African drug trade.
- *The Buck Stops Here: U.S. Anti-Money Laundering Practices* examines anti-money laundering efforts in the United States and around the world to more effectively deny drug trafficking organizations the funds that fuel drug related violence.
- *Preventing a Security Crisis in the Caribbean* which emphasizes the need to combat drug related violence in the region and prevent the Caribbean from slipping back to the drug trafficking hotspot that it once was.
- *Reducing the U.S. Demand for Illegal Drugs* looks at strategies to reduce drug abuse in our communities to reduce the harms it causes both at home and abroad.

Previous reports have dealt with Mexican drug trafficking organizations, firearms trafficking to Mexico and violence in Central America.



Senator Feinstein chairs a hearing on border tunnels



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