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Tougher Border Can't Stop Mexican Marijuana Cartels

By [SOLOMON MOORE](#)

TUCSON — Drug smugglers parked a car transport trailer against the Mexican side of the border one day in December, dropped a ramp over the security fence, and drove two pickup trucks filled with marijuana onto Arizona soil.

As [Border Patrol](#) agents gave chase, a third truck appeared on the Mexican side and gunmen sprayed machine-gun fire over the fence at the agents. Smugglers in the first vehicles torched one truck and abandoned the other, with \$1 million worth of marijuana still in the truck bed. Then they vaulted back over the barrier into [Mexico](#)'s Sonora state.

Despite huge enforcement actions on both sides of the Southwest border, the Mexican marijuana trade is more robust — and brazen — than ever, law enforcement officials say. [Mexican drug cartels](#) routinely transported industrial-size loads of marijuana in 2008, excavating new tunnels and adopting tactics like ramp-assisted smuggling to get their cargoes across undetected.

But these are not the only new tactics: the cartels are also increasingly planting marijuana crops inside the United States in a major strategy shift to avoid the border altogether, officials said. Last year, drug enforcement authorities confiscated record amounts of high potency plants from Miami to San Diego, and even from vineyards leased by cartels in Washington State. Mexican drug traffickers have also moved into hydroponic marijuana production — cannabis grown indoors without soil and nourished with sunlamps — challenging Asian networks and smaller, individual growers here.

A Justice Department report issued last year concluded that Mexican drug trafficking organizations now operated in 195 cities, up from about 50 cities in 2006.

The four largest cartels with affiliates in United States cities were the Federation, the Tijuana Cartel, the Juarez Cartel and the Gulf Cartel.

“There is evidence that Mexican cartels are also increasing their relationships with prison and street gangs in the United States in order to facilitate drug trafficking,” a Congressional report from February 2008 stated. Intelligence analysts were detecting increased Mexican drug cartel-related activity in Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Seattle and Yakima, Wash. — areas that used to be controlled by other ethnic networks.

Smuggling is still most conspicuous in the Southwest, which has been home to Mexican traffickers for more than two decades. From Nogales, Ariz., recently, a reporter watched as smugglers across the border, in hilltop stations, peered through binoculars at the movements of American Border Patrol agents. The agents

gunned their trucks along the barrier looking for illegal crossings.

About noon, border agents saw a 60-pound bale of marijuana drop over the fence.

“That kind of thing happens every day here,” said Agent Michael A. Scioli, a spokesman for [Customs and Border Protection](#).

For the cartels, “marijuana is the king crop,” said Special Agent Rafael Reyes, the chief of the Mexico and Central America Section of the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#). “It consistently sustains its marketability and profitability.”

Marijuana trafficking continues virtually unabated in the United States, even as intelligence reports suggest the declining availability of heroin, cocaine and other hard drugs that require extensive smuggling operations.

By combining smuggling with domestic production, the cartels have sustained the marijuana trade despite the onslaught of enforcement actions on both sides of the border. From 2000 through 2007, Mexican authorities arrested about 90,000 drug traffickers, more than 400 hit men and a dozen cartel leaders, according to a 2008 Congressional report. The United States extradited 95 Mexican nationals last year. Seizures in the first half of 2008 outpaced the average seizure rate from 2002 to 2006.

But the price has been high. Tensions have increased among the cartels, which are warring over lucrative drug routes through Mexican border towns like Juarez, Tijuana and Nogales, Sonora. More than 6,000 people, including hundreds of police officers, were killed by drug-related violence in Mexico in 2008. United States Border Patrol agents are also reporting more violent confrontations with traffickers.

As the Mexican government and American authorities have hardened the border, drug cartels are increasing production just north of it to avoid resorting to smuggling.

Many of the largest marijuana plantations are hidden on federal and state parklands, federal authorities say. Bill Sherman, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent based in San Diego, said the authorities were also finding an increasing number of farms in Imperial and San Diego Counties, an area traffickers traditionally avoided because of the presence of border guards, various police agencies and Camp Pendleton, a Marine base.

“We’re seeing a lot more grows down here now,” Mr. Sherman said. “That is a shift.”

Drug enforcement agents uprooted about 6.6 million cannabis plants grown mostly by cartels in 2007, one-third more than the plants destroyed in 2006. In California, the nation’s largest domestic marijuana producer, the authorities eradicated a record 2.9 million plants by the end of the marijuana harvest in December.

Yet enforcement officials say they see no discernible reduction in the domestic supply. Prices have remained relatively steady even as the potency of marijuana increased to record levels in 2007, according to the National Drug Intelligence Center, a Justice Department analysis agency.

Mr. Reyes also noted that Mexican traffickers in the United States were choosing hydroponic marijuana,

which is more potent, profitable and easier to hide because it can be grown year round with sunlamps. (A pound of midgrade marijuana sells for about \$750 in Los Angeles, compared with \$2,500 to \$6,000 for a pound of hydroponic marijuana.) He noted a case last year in Florida in which Cuban growers used several houses in a single Miami tract development to supply hydroponic marijuana to Mexican traffickers.

Kathryn McCarthy, an assistant United States attorney in Detroit, said Mexican traffickers in Michigan were trading Colombian cocaine for hydroponic marijuana from British Columbia to sell in the United States. In Washington State, now the second biggest domestic producer of marijuana, Mexican cartels are growing improved varieties of outdoor marijuana to compete with BC Bud and other potent indoor plants.

Last year, narcotics officers discovered 200,000 high-quality marijuana plants growing amid leased vineyards in the Yakima Valley. The Northwest has traditionally been the province of Asian hydroponic networks.

Despite increased planting, the cartels still rely on smuggling. Near Nogales, Ariz., Mr. Scioli pointed out several cross-border tunnels, one of which extended from the backyard of a house, under the fence and into Mexico 40 yards away. Another series of cross-border tunnels made use of existing sewer lines or drainage pipes. They were among the nine smuggling tunnels drug enforcement agents have discovered there since 2003.

Despite the fact that the authorities are discovering more marijuana production inside the United States, most of the cartels' leadership remains in Mexico and, for now, so does most of the violence. Still, recent photographs from Mexico of the decapitated heads of Mexican policemen play in the minds of law enforcement officials on this side of the border, who are vigilant for signs of spillover.

The Mexican police in Sonora "are stuck between two warring cartels," said Anthony J. Coulson, a federal drug enforcement agent. "The cops are being killed as pawns. They're being used to show how much power and control the cartels have."

Mr. Reyes, the special agent, said, "The violence is happening because of the pressure we've exacted, but it does not fuel any increase or decrease in marijuana."

No one sees a quick end of the violence in Nogales, Sonora.

Sheriff Tony Estrada of Santa Cruz County said there was so much violence on the other side of the border that many Mexican police officers and politicians had become virtual refugees in Nogales, Ariz.

"The violence has left a large contingent of police on this side of the border," Sheriff Estrada said. "The killing will stop when somebody dominates. When somebody takes control."

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