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BORDER CONTROL

Revised Strategy is Showing  
Some Positive Results

Statement of  
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**BORDER CONTROL: REVISED STRATEGY IS  
SHOWING SOME POSITIVE RESULTS**

**SUMMARY OF STATEMENT BY  
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Drug smuggling and illegal immigration are serious threats along the southwest border. Experts estimate that most of the cocaine and most illegal aliens entering the U.S. enter from Mexico across the southwest border. Despite law enforcement efforts, the drug flow continues, and, unless border control efforts become more effective, illegal immigration is expected to increase over the next decade. Within the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the Border Patrol is the agency responsible for securing the border between the ports of entry.

To enhance security between the ports of entry, a 1993 study recommended that the Border Patrol focus on preventing illegal alien entry instead of on apprehending aliens once they have entered the United States. To implement this "prevention" strategy, the study recommended multiple physical barriers in certain border areas, as well as other measures.

There was widespread support for a "prevention" strategy among the federal and local government officials with whom GAO spoke. Preliminary results from recent prevention initiatives in the San Diego and El Paso areas are generally encouraging. However, these initiatives appear to have resulted in rerouting some drug smuggling and illegal immigration to other southwest border areas.

The national Border Patrol strategic plan approved in August 1994 focuses on preventing illegal entry. The plan builds on the success the San Diego and El Paso areas have reportedly had in reducing illegal entry. INS plans to implement its strategy in phases over several years and monitor closely the strategy's progress to determine the appropriate mix of personnel and other types of resources needed to gain control of the U.S. border. According to the Chief of the Border Patrol, technology improvements, such as improved fencing, would reduce the need for significant numbers of additional agents.

INS' new border control strategy shows promise for reducing illegal entry since it (1) builds on the reported successes in San Diego and El Paso, (2) is consistent with recommendations made in previous studies, and (3) has widespread support. Since it will take several years to implement the strategy, it is too early to tell what impact it will eventually have on drug smuggling and illegal immigration along the southwest border.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our recent report on the United States' efforts to secure the southwest border.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, our report discusses (1) the extent of the threat from drug smuggling and illegal immigration and (2) ways to enhance security between the ports of entry. My testimony includes some follow-up data we collected from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) since we concluded our review in September 1994.

Although the full extent of drug smuggling and illegal immigration is unknown, both pose a serious threat along the southwest border. Experts estimate that most of the cocaine and most of the illegal aliens entering the United States enter from Mexico across the southwest border. Despite law enforcement efforts, the flow of drugs continues, and, unless border control efforts become more effective, illegal immigration is expected to increase over the next decade.

To enhance security along the southwest border, a 1993 Sandia National Laboratories' study, commissioned by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), recommended that the Border Patrol focus on preventing illegal entry instead of

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<sup>1</sup>Border Control: Revised Strategy Is Showing Some Positive Results (GAO/GGD-95-30, Dec. 29, 1994).

apprehending aliens once they have entered the country.<sup>2</sup> This study recommended prevention measures, such as multiple barriers, enhanced checkpoint operations, and enhanced electronic surveillance equipment, which would significantly increase the difficulty of crossing the border illegally. A January 1989 study made similar recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

In August 1994, the INS Commissioner approved a national Border Patrol strategic plan that focuses on preventing illegal entry. INS' national strategy builds on the successes that its San Diego and El Paso sectors have reportedly had in reducing illegal entry. INS plans to implement its strategy in phases over several years, concentrating initially in the two areas that traditionally had the greatest illegal activity--San Diego and El Paso. The strategy contains various indicators with which INS plans to measure the success of its efforts.

#### BACKGROUND

Within INS, the Border Patrol is the agency responsible for securing the border between the ports of entry. The Border

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<sup>2</sup>Systematic Analysis of the Southwest Border (referred to as the Sandia study), Sandia National Laboratories, January 1993. ONDCP chose Sandia due to its expertise in designing physical security systems.

<sup>3</sup>Ten Steps to Securing America's Border, Federation for American Immigration Reform, January 1989, Washington, D.C.

Patrol's mission is to maintain control of the international boundaries between the ports of entry by detecting and preventing smuggling and illegal entry of aliens into the United States. In addition, in 1991, ONDCP designated the Border Patrol the primary agency for narcotics interdiction between the ports of entry.

To accomplish its mission, the Border Patrol (1) patrols the international boundaries and (2) inspects passengers and vehicles at checkpoints located along highways leading from border areas, at bus and rail stations, and at air terminals. The Border Patrol uses vehicles and aircraft to patrol areas between the ports of entry and electronic equipment, such as sensors and low-light-level televisions, to detect illegal entry into the country. The Border Patrol carries out its mission in 21 sectors. Nine of these sectors are located along the southwest border with Mexico.<sup>4</sup> As of September 30, 1994, about 3,747 agents were assigned to these 9 sectors, representing 88 percent of Border Patrol agents nationwide.

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<sup>4</sup>These nine sectors are located in San Diego and El Centro, CA; Yuma and Tucson, AZ; and El Paso, Del Rio, Marfa, Laredo, and McAllen, TX.

DRUG SMUGGLING AND ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION  
ARE SERIOUS THREATS ALONG THE  
SOUTHWEST BORDER

Drug Smuggling

Although the full extent is unknown, drug smuggling is a serious threat along the southwest border. The Department of State's 1993 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report indicated that Mexico is a transit country for South American cocaine destined for the United States and a major country of origin for heroin and marijuana. According to the report, between 50 and 70 percent of the cocaine smuggled into the United States transited Mexico, entering primarily by land across the southwest border. In addition, about 23 percent of the heroin smuggled into the United States originated in Mexico.

INS data showed that Border Patrol narcotics seizures along the southwest border have risen over the last few years. Between fiscal years 1990 and 1993, the number of Border Patrol narcotics seizures rose from around 4,200 to approximately 6,400, an increase of about 50 percent. The amount of cocaine seized nearly doubled from about 14,000 pounds in 1990 to about 27,000 pounds in 1993.

According to a June 1992 Operation Alliance report,<sup>5</sup> the primary smuggling route across the southwest border was by land. The report pointed out that although cocaine was the primary drug threat, followed by marijuana, the heroin threat was growing. The report stated that in spite of law enforcement agencies' efforts to counter drug smuggling, the flow of drugs between the ports of entry along the southwest border continued due to vast open areas and a relatively low law enforcement presence. The report concluded that "our successes are insignificant when compared to the threat."

### Illegal Immigration

Illegal immigration is also a serious threat to the United States. In 1993, we estimated that the total inflow of illegal aliens into this country in 1988 ranged from 1.3 million to 3.9 million.<sup>6</sup> The major component of the inflow, 1.2 million to 3.2 million, was Mexicans crossing the southwest border, with most entering between the ports of

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<sup>5</sup>Southwest Border Drug Control Strategy II, Operation Alliance, June 1992. Operation Alliance prepares border control strategies and coordinates drug enforcement activities of 17 federal and numerous state and local law enforcement agencies combatting drug smuggling.

<sup>6</sup>Illegal Aliens: Despite Data Limitations, Current Methods Provide Better Population Estimates (GAO/PEMD-93-25, Aug. 5, 1993). Due to data limitations, 1988 was the most recent year for which we could make a reliable estimate.

entry. Much of the inflow represented short-term visits to the United States.

In June 1994, INS estimated there were about 3.8 million undocumented migrants residing in the United States. About half of these unlawful residents entered without documentation across the borders, while the other half entered lawfully as visitors but did not leave.

In fiscal year 1993, the San Diego and El Paso Border Patrol sectors accounted for two-thirds of the 1.2 million southwest border apprehensions. Our analysis of INS data showed that in fiscal year 1992 over half of all southwest border apprehensions occurred along only 18 of the 1,600 border miles--13 miles along the border between San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico, and 5 miles along the border between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. However, recent border control initiatives in San Diego and El Paso appear to have resulted in rerouting some illegal immigrants to other southwest border areas. For example, San Diego and El Paso's share of total southwest border apprehensions dropped from two-thirds in fiscal year 1993 to about one-half in fiscal year 1994.

Unless border control efforts become more effective, illegal immigration is expected to increase. In September 1993, we



reported that the flow of illegal aliens across the southwest border is expected to increase during the next decade because Mexico's economy is unlikely to absorb all of the new job seekers that are expected to enter the labor force.<sup>7</sup> In recent testimony before the House Committee on Banking and Financial Services, both the Treasury Secretary and the Secretary of State expressed concern that the recent peso devaluation could increase illegal migration.<sup>8</sup>

#### PREVENTION STRATEGY HAS

#### WIDESPREAD SUPPORT

The Border Patrol officials with whom we spoke (including the chief, acting deputy chief, San Diego and El Paso chief patrol agents, and a regional Border Patrol official) all agreed with the Sandia study's conclusion that the Border Patrol should focus on preventing illegal entry rather than on apprehending illegal aliens. In addition, officials of the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC),<sup>9</sup> Operation

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<sup>7</sup>North American Free Trade Agreement: Assessment of Major Issues, Volume 2 (GAO/GGD-93-137, Sept. 9, 1993).

<sup>8</sup>Statement of the Honorable Robert E. Rubin, Secretary of the Treasury, January 25, 1995. Statement by Secretary of State Warren Christopher, January 25, 1995.

<sup>9</sup>The El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) is the nation's principal tactical drug intelligence facility, preparing assessments on the threat of drug smuggling.

Alliance, Joint Task Force Six (JTF-6),<sup>10</sup> and the mayor and police officials of El Paso support the concept of trying to prevent entry rather than apprehending aliens.

This strategy is also in line with our past positions on controlling illegal immigration. In June 1993, we testified before this Committee that "the key to controlling the illegal entry of aliens is to prevent their initial arrival."<sup>11</sup>

RECENT SAN DIEGO AND EL PASO BORDER  
CONTROL PREVENTION INITIATIVES APPEAR  
ENCOURAGING

Both the San Diego and El Paso sectors have begun major border control initiatives that focus on preventing illegal entry rather than on apprehending aliens. Preliminary results in these two sectors suggest that the prevention strategy has reduced illegal entry in these sectors. Other benefits include less border crime, less confrontation between Border Patrol agents and illegal aliens, and strong public and government support.

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<sup>10</sup>The Joint Task Force Six (JTF-6), located in El Paso, coordinates military support for drug enforcement efforts.

<sup>11</sup>Immigration Enforcement: Problems in Controlling the Flow of Illegal Aliens (GAO/T-GGD-93-39, June 30, 1993).

San Diego Sector Erected Physical  
Barriers and Lighting

In 1990, the San Diego sector's chief patrol agent began an initiative to erect physical barriers, primarily to deter drug smuggling. With the assistance of JTF-6, the San Diego sector installed 10-foot welded steel fencing along approximately 13 miles of border where sector officials believed the majority of drugs and illegal aliens crossed within the sector. The new fence, completed in late 1993, is substantially stronger than previous chain link fencing. JTF-6 is also installing high-intensity lights and a second and third fence at strategic locations along the same 13 miles. As of February 7, 1995, JTF-6 had installed lights along about 4-1/2 of the 13 miles.

Although the San Diego sector's border control initiative has not been fully implemented, indications are that the new tactics are reducing the number of aliens crossing the border illegally in the San Diego area. Sector apprehensions were down 20 percent in fiscal year 1994 compared to 1992 and dropped below 1990 levels, the year the sector began implementing its new border control tactics (see app. I). Apprehensions decreased even though the sector increased the amount of time spent on border enforcement nearly 41 percent between 1990 and 1994.

Also, apprehensions at highway checkpoints away from the border declined 24 percent between fiscal years 1990 and 1993 even though the amount of time spent performing traffic checks increased 22 percent.

During our review, we toured the most heavily trafficked portion of the San Diego sector border and found visible evidence of the new tactics' effect on illegal border crossing. Before the new border control tactics, hundreds of aliens would line up along the U.S. side of the border during daylight hours, waiting for an opportunity to go northward. However, after the new border patrol tactics were initiated, large groups of aliens no longer waited during the day to cross at night, which according to a Border Patrol official is now typical. Also, formerly there were large gaps in border fencing allowing aliens to easily cross the border. However, these gaps in the fencing have now been closed.

#### El Paso Sector Initiated

#### "Operation Hold-the-Line"

Before September 1993, like San Diego, the El Paso sector's strategy emphasized apprehending aliens rather than preventing illegal entry. However, as apprehensions increased so did the opportunities for confrontation between

illegal aliens and El Paso Border Patrol agents. These increased opportunities for confrontation led to allegations of abuse against agents.

Under the sector's apprehension strategy, El Paso's chief patrol agent told us that the border area was in "complete chaos." The chief estimated there were up to 8,000 to 10,000 illegal border crossings daily, and only 1 out of 8 aliens was apprehended. In addition, El Paso police officials estimated illegal aliens had a significant impact on the city's crime rates, committing 75 to 80 percent of all auto thefts, as well as many burglaries.

El Paso's chief patrol agent began an initiative in September 1993 to change the sector's border control strategy to one of preventing illegal entry. The sector stationed all available agents immediately at a 20-mile stretch of the border in highly visible Border Patrol vehicles. The primary goal of the new strategy--Operation Hold-the-Line--was preventing significant numbers of aliens from entering the El Paso metropolitan area.<sup>12</sup> Those who still tried to cross the border illegally were routed to less populated areas where they could be more easily apprehended.

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<sup>12</sup>Operation Hold-the-Line was initially called "Operation Blockade".

El Paso sector officials cited several indications that its new prevention strategy is working. For example, according to the Border Patrol, the number of aliens attempting to illegally cross the border through the El Paso sector has decreased significantly. According to the chief patrol agent, before Operation Hold-the-Line, there were up to 10,000 illegal border crossings daily. In February 1994, the sector estimated that only about 500 people a day were illegally crossing the border. A March 1994 sector intelligence report indicated the new strategy had deterred many aliens in Mexico's interior from coming to the El Paso border area.

There has been a sharp drop in El Paso sector apprehensions since implementation of its new strategy. The El Paso sector's illegal alien apprehensions in fiscal year 1994 were down 72 percent compared to fiscal year 1993 (see app. II). Two factors influencing this decrease are the deterrent effect of the new prevention strategy and the rerouting of some illegal aliens to other southwest border areas.

The El Paso public strongly supports the sector's new strategy. A poll taken in February 1994 showed 84 percent

of those polled were in favor of the new strategy.<sup>13</sup> Also, police officials attribute a drop in certain crimes to Operation Hold-the-Line. For example, there were nearly one-third fewer burglaries and one-fourth fewer motor vehicle thefts in the 3 months after the operation began in September 1993 than in same 3 months in 1992.

Two studies also concluded that Operation Hold-the-Line has been successful in deterring illegal immigration in El Paso. A December 1993 study of Operation Hold-the-Line by the Center for Immigration Studies<sup>14</sup> concluded that the operation "has proven to be successful" and the new preventative deployment was "both more humane and more effective." According to this study, the operation represented a viable long-term approach to more successful border control.

A July 1994 study requested by the Commission on Immigration Reform<sup>15</sup> found that Operation Hold-the-Line significantly

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<sup>13</sup>An exit poll of democratic primary voters taken on February 26 and 27, 1994. The poll was conducted by Kaigh Associates, El Paso.

<sup>14</sup>John L. Martin, "Operation Blockade: A Bullying Tactic or a Border Control Model?" BACKGROUND, Center For Immigration Studies, Washington, D.C., December 1993.

<sup>15</sup>Frank D. Bean, et al, "Illegal Mexican Migration and the United States Mexico Border: The Effects of Operation Hold-the-Line on El Paso/Juarez", Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, July 15, 1994.

reduced illegal crossings, and resulted in less crime and fewer allegations against Border Patrol agents. In addition, the strategy appeared to have broad public support.

However, the operation may be having different effects depending on the type of illegal border crosser. For example, the operation has had less of a deterrent effect on those who illegally cross the border to find work in other locations in the United States. According to the study, these crossers have shifted their crossing points to other border locations. Conversely, illegal crossers who engage in street vending and low-level criminal activities have been substantially deterred from crossing the border. The operation has also had some unintended consequences. For example, in some cases, those crossers who normally would cross the border daily to work illegally in El Paso have extended their stay in El Paso to reduce the number of times that they illegally cross the border.

According to an El Paso Assistant Chief Patrol Agent, the sector has recently experienced an increase in apprehensions. For the first 4 months of fiscal year 1995, apprehensions were 29 percent higher than the same time last year (26,900 versus 20,900). The official attributed this rise to increased alien smuggling, aliens attempting to



return to the U.S. after the holidays, and the recent devaluation of the Mexican peso. However, although the El Paso sector is currently averaging about 6,700 alien apprehensions per month, this is still significantly lower than the 24,000 per month the sector averaged in fiscal year 1993, before Operation Hold-the-Line.

SAN DIEGO AND EL PASO SECTORS'  
INITIATIVES HAVE RESULTED IN  
REROUTING DRUGS AND ALIENS TO  
OTHER SOUTHWEST BORDER AREAS

The San Diego and El Paso sectors' initiatives appear to have resulted in rerouting drugs and illegal aliens to other parts of the southwest border.

Interviews with apprehended illegal aliens have revealed that smugglers are now telling those travelling from the interior of Mexico that it is easier to cross into Nogales, AZ, rather than into San Diego or El Paso, according to Tucson's Deputy Chief Patrol Agent. In addition, according to the deputy, some smugglers are reported to be moving their operations from San Diego to Nogales.

A comparison of Tucson and El Paso sector apprehensions appears to support the premise that the recent San Diego and

El Paso initiatives have increased illegal entry through other southwest border sectors. Since the start of the initiative in the El Paso sector, Tucson sector apprehensions have increased about 50 percent (about 93,000 in fiscal year 1993 compared to 139,000 in fiscal year 1994). El Paso apprehensions, on the other hand, dropped 72 percent (from about 286,000 to about 80,000 over the same period). (See app. III).

Another indication that illegal alien entry may be moving to other sectors is that while the San Diego sector's fiscal year 1994 apprehensions were 15 percent lower than in fiscal year 1993, and El Paso's were down 72 percent over the same period, apprehensions in the remaining seven southwest border sectors increased about 14 percent (see app. IV).

Drug trafficking has also apparently been affected. According to EPIC's December 1993 Monthly Threat Brief, El Paso's Operation Hold-the-Line has led to changes in smuggling methods. Instead of fording the Rio Grande River, some smugglers have attempted to move drugs through ports of entry and to areas east and west of El Paso, around the sector's 20-mile line of agents.

According to a San Diego sector official, the new fence has virtually eliminated drug and alien smugglers driving across

the border in the San Diego sector. However, the sector has noticed an increase in drug smuggling in the mountainous areas east of San Diego. In addition, the amount of cocaine seized in the El Centro sector, the sector adjacent to San Diego, increased dramatically from 698 pounds in fiscal year 1991 to nearly 18,000 pounds in fiscal year 1993.

On February 5, 1995, the President directed INS to send 62 additional Border Patrol agents to Nogales to combat an unprecedented rise in illegal border crossings there. According to a White House statement, the administration attributes this dramatic increase to the California and Texas border control initiatives, as well as the recent devaluation of the Mexican peso. The additional agents are being reassigned from the Canadian border, as well as from interior Border Patrol stations.

#### INS' NATIONAL BORDER CONTROL STRATEGY

In August 1994, the INS Commissioner approved a national Border Patrol strategic plan for gaining control of the nation's borders. The strategy focuses on preventing illegal entry and builds on the success INS has reportedly had in San Diego and El Paso. INS plans to put more agents along the border and use more lighting, fencing, and other barriers. On the basis of the national border control

strategy, each southwest border sector developed its own strategy identifying specific actions that need to be taken.

INS plans to use a phased approach to implementing its border control strategy. In its first phase, INS plans to focus its resources in the two sectors where most illegal immigration has traditionally occurred--San Diego and El Paso. As border control continues to improve in San Diego and El Paso, INS anticipates that other sectors will continue to experience an increase in illegal entry.

Therefore, the second phase targets the Tucson sector and south Texas--areas that are expected to be most affected by the enhancements at San Diego and El Paso. The third phase targets the rest of the southwest border, and phase four targets the rest of the U.S. border. According to a Border Patrol official, INS is currently transitioning from phase one to phase two.

INS has identified certain indicators that it plans to use in each of these phases to determine whether its efforts are successful. The proposed indicators include: (1) an eventual reduction in apprehensions and recidivism, (2) an increase in attempted fraudulent admissions at ports of entry, (3) a shift in the flow of illegal aliens to other sectors, and (4) fewer illegal aliens in the interior of the United States.

To achieve border control, the strategy recognizes the need to coordinate with other INS programs and with other federal agencies, such as the Department of Defense, Customs Service, and the Drug Enforcement Administration, as well as state and local law enforcement agencies.

INS officials told us that it will take several years to implement the strategy and that INS did not have a specific time frame or cost figures for these improvements. INS officials believe that technology improvements, such as improved fencing and surveillance cameras, would make border control strategies more effective. According to the Chief of the Border Patrol, these improvements would reduce the need for significant numbers of additional agents. INS plans to closely monitor the strategy's progress to determine the appropriate mix of personnel and other types of resources needed to gain control of the U.S. border.

### CONCLUSIONS

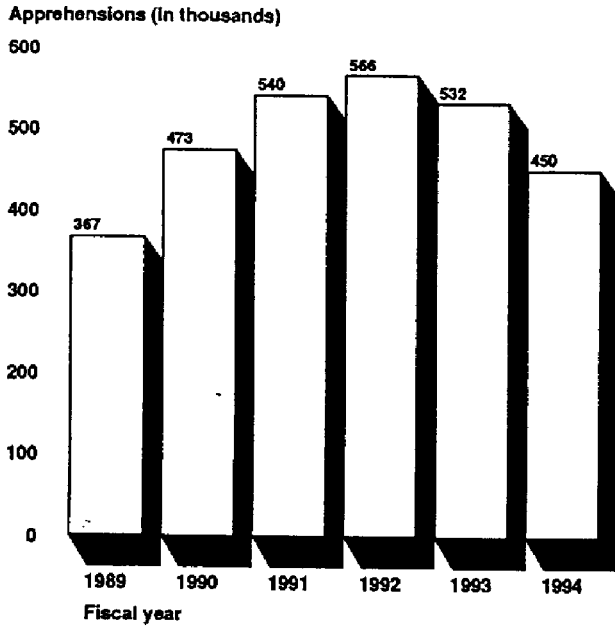
We believe the new national border control strategy shows promise for reducing illegal entry since the strategy (1) builds on the reported success the San Diego and El Paso sectors have had in reducing illegal immigration, (2) is consistent with recommendations made in previous comprehensive studies conducted by border control and

physical security experts, and (3) has widespread public and government support. However, since it will take several years to implement the strategy, it is too early to tell what impact it will eventually have on drug smuggling and illegal immigration along the southwest border. Tightening border control in some sectors seems to put added stress on other sectors. This speaks to the need for a comprehensive approach along the entire border.

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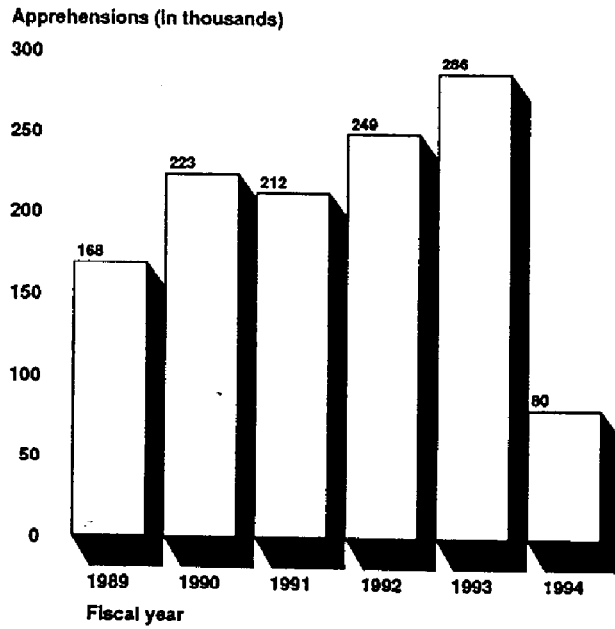
This concludes my prepared statement. My colleagues and I would be pleased to answer any questions.

SAN DIEGO SECTOR'S FISCAL YEAR 1994 BORDER APPREHENSIONS ARE DOWN FROM PREVIOUS YEARS



Source: Border Patrol data.

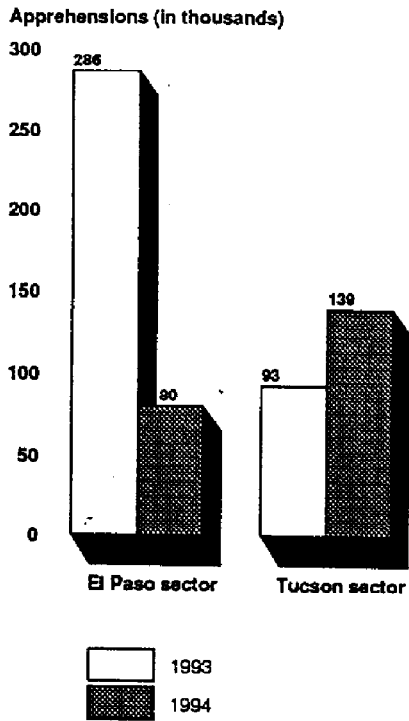
EL PASO SECTOR'S FISCAL YEAR 1994 BORDER APPREHENSIONS  
ARE DOWN SHARPLY FROM PREVIOUS YEARS



Source: Border Patrol data.

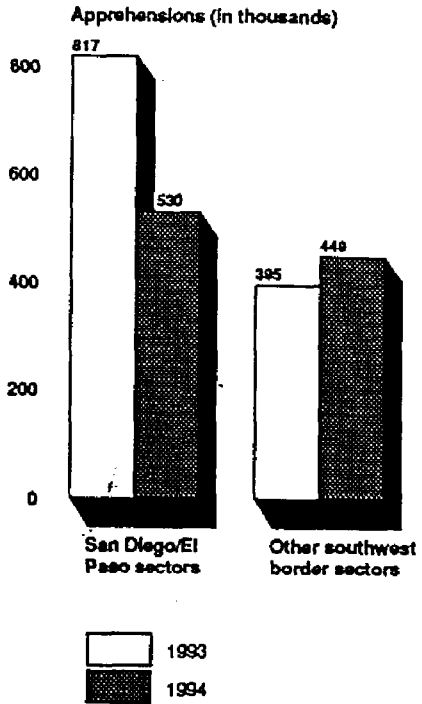


TUCSON SECTOR'S FISCAL YEAR 1994 BORDER APPREHENSIONS HAVE INCREASED AS EL PASO APPREHENSIONS HAVE DROPPED



Source: Border Patrol data.

SAN DIEGO AND EL PASO'S APPREHENSIONS HAVE DECLINED  
WHILE OTHER SOUTHWEST SECTORS HAVE INCREASED



Source: Border Patrol data.

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