

Some want US to ditch plan for border barrier

By Dean Nelson
Special to the Globe

SAN DIEGO - Of the nearly 2,000 miles of the US-Mexico border, a 66-mile stretch south of San Diego is apparently the most popular with illegal aliens. Last year the US Border Patrol caught 500,327 persons trying to sneak through this section - 45 percent of the entire number captured from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico.

The next-highest area for apprehensions was El Paso, with 231,994.

Much has been made in recent months over the porous nature of the border below San Diego because of an increase in suspected drug smuggling and a continuous stream of people trying to sneak into the United States. Some estimate that as many as 5,000 people attempt to enter the United States illegally every 24 hours through the rugged hills and canyons in this section.

The rhetoric of concern turned specific last week as two groups unveiled separate proposals to curb some of the illegal activity along the border. The US Justice Department announced Wednesday that it wants to dig a 5-foot-deep ditch along a particularly flat portion of the border where an estimated 1,555 vehicles have crossed into the United States ille-

gally since July. Some of the vehicles are vans loaded with as many as 30 illegal aliens, a border patrol officer said.

The ditch would prevent the vehicles from crossing the flat area, forcing them into the desert, canyons or mountains and making detection easier, the border patrol said. The proposed channel would be 4½ miles long and would also serve as a drainage runoff area for the businesses that have built up recently on both sides of the border.

Studying impact

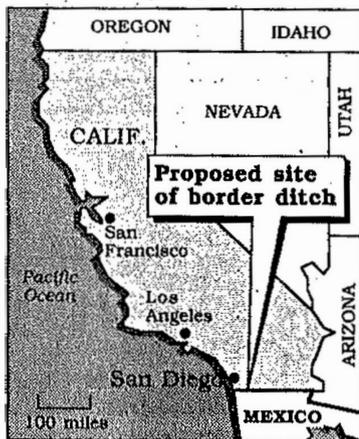
The Justice Department's Immigration and Naturalization Service has commissioned an environmental impact report for the construction of the ditch, and the project could be completed by summer.

On Thursday, a much more ambitious proposal was offered by the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington-based lobbying group. The group, which calls itself by its acronym, FAIR, announced in news conferences both in Washington and San Diego that it was proposing construction of a 12-foot sunken wall with an 8-foot reinforced fence on top of it for 20 miles through the more populated portions of the border between San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico.

To pay for the barrier, the group proposed that a \$2 fee be charged to anyone entering the United States through the legal points of entry.

Addressing the overall US-Mexico border issue, FAIR recommended sanctions against employers who hire aliens and the addition of more border checkpoints and more border agents. Its recommendations for San Diego are the most stringent because that section of the border is the most permeable. The group is lobbying House and Senate members to introduce its measures in Congress.

These two proposals are the most concrete of those that have been discussed in the past year. Rep. Jim Bates, a San Diego



Democrat, introduced his own version of a bill for a higher and stronger fence during the last session of the House. He also has proposed covering the costs by charging fees to enter the country: a dollar for vehicles and 25 cents for pedestrians crossing through the entry points, to be split between the federal and local governments to help pay for the fence.

Discussed using Guard

Other discussion has included recommendations to mobilize the National Guard to patrol the border.

FAIR's ideas will be discussed by various committees and task forces, a FAIR source said. The construction of the INS ditch appears to be more of an accomplished fact, and San Diego city officials dislike the idea.

"It's an insult to me and to the city," said Bob Filner, a city councilman whose district includes the ditch area. "My constituents are incensed. It's just another insulting posture the US is taking in regard to Mexico, just as the country is saying we're on friendlier terms. Why don't they build a moat instead?"

The timing of the ditch announcement was ironic, he said, because it came on the same day as the release of a report from a local association of governments that recommended that San Diego

consider a joint-use international airport with Tijuana.

"A ditch doesn't come close to solving the problem," he said. "The fact that a Berlin Wall kind of an idea could even occur to them really bothers me."

"Truly amazed"

Paul Downey of Mayor Maureen O'Connor's office said he was "truly amazed" when he heard about the plan.

"We have been having joint City Council meetings with Tijuana trying to share our mutual concerns, which include illegal aliens and drug smuggling, and we were making great strides," he said. "Our twin-plant businesses on both sides of the border are going gangbusters. This isn't going to help us." Local Hispanic groups called the ditch an "act of hostility" toward Mexico.

"This is a national issue, not a border patrol issue," said Irma Castro, executive director of the Chicano Federation. "People are going to find a way into this country as long as they don't have economic and political security in their own countries. The problem of illegal aliens is one of a broader national relationship. Is the US starting to look at Mexico as the enemy?"

Peter Nunez, a former US attorney in San Diego who last year went into private practice, said he supports the tighter controls along the border, not because he sees Mexico as an enemy but because "the United States a long time ago recognized Mexico as a separate country."

"Laws were passed long ago to close our borders," he said. "So why are we acting as if we have an open border? If we're not going to have a closed border, then we might as well repeal the law and not sacrifice the lives of the border patrol."

Fence used already

A fence already is in place in the more populous areas along the border, but huge holes have been cut through it in some places, and in others it has been pulled down altogether. Once past the urban sections, the flat border is designated at times by a single cable about 2 feet off the ground. The canyons and hills have no physical barrier at all.

The region has 725 border patrol agents, and they combat the nightly rush on horseback, in helicopters and small planes and in all-terrain vehicles and by using underground sensors and infrared scopes.

"To those who say we're wanting to build a Berlin Wall, I must remind them that it was built to keep people inside a country," said Nunez. "We're talking about enforcing the law here."

Still, some say that no matter what kind of structure is built or dug, motivated people will find a way through.

"These are very resourceful people," said Mirna Perez, chairwoman of a border area community group that advises the city. "After a month or two, they'll figure a way to get across."