



INFORMATION BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: Federal officers secure border with Canada

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Drive any distance along the St. Clair River, and you're bound to see at least one green and white U.S. Border Patrol car.

That's by design, said Matt Calmes, patrol agent in charge at the U.S. Border Patrol Station in Marysville.

"We are here to protect our country," he said. "Our main focus are terrorists — 9/11 still lives with all of our agents deeply.

"I was on duty in San Diego, California, when we got the call that day, and I still remember it."

With 85 staff members at the Marysville Station, Customs and Border Protection Border Patrol agents are on the streets every day observing border areas between ports of entry such as the Blue Water Bridge and Marine City-Sombra ferry.

The federal presence along the border has increased during the first years of the 21st century, Calmes said.

"In the 1930s and '40s we only had about 35 Border Patrol agents in this area," Calmes said. "In the '70s and '80s, that number went down to just a handful because everyone was focusing on the drug cartels on the southwest border of the country."

The terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, changed that.

"Homeland Security decided that 10 percent of overall CBP staffing had to be located at the northern border of the county after 9/11," Calmes said. "And the Detroit sector was allotted the bulk of those agents."

Customs and Border Patrol has three divisions:

- Office of Field Operations officers are stationed at the ports of entry — they're the officers asking for proof of citizenship when you're returning from Canada.
- Office of Border Patrol agents are looking for people skirting the ports of entry and trying to sneak into the country unlawfully. Agents working out of the Marysville CBP Border Patrol station drive sedans, SUVs and pickup trucks; operate boats; and ride bicycles.
- Office of Air and Marine agents, pilots and commanders work in the air and on water. The CBP Office of Air and Marine provides air support for all CBP divisions.

Agents typically patrol near the river — often in marked vehicles, but sometimes in unmarked cars, on foot or on bicycles.

"Our mission is to prevent terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering into the country," Calmes said. "But we also deal with illegal immigrants and product trafficking."

The Marysville CBP Border Patrol Station is part of the Detroit sector of the Border Patrol, which encompasses Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan.

The Detroit sector includes 417 agents.

Looking for illegal activity

Border Patrol agents are looking for possible terrorists and weapons, product trafficking, criminal organizations and illegal immigrants.

Calmes said illegal immigrants mostly come to the United States to find work. As Michigan is an agriculture state, it is easy for immigrants to find jobs where they can be paid off the books.

Calmes said the northern border of the United States is very different from the southwest border.

"It's a different dynamic here," he said. "We are unique because we are more rural, and we are completely encompassed by lakes. The southwest border also has a different criminal demographic. They have the Mexican drug cartels down there."

Drugs do, however, find their way to the northern border, he said.

"We see a lot of outbound traffic, or people smuggling things out of the country, because they can make more money that way," Calmes said. "It's not just marijuana, cocaine and ecstasy that smugglers are carrying, but tobacco, too."

Smugglers move people, pills, tobacco, guns and drugs across the border, inbound and outbound.

Tobacco might seem an odd thing to smuggle — it's a legal product sold over the counter — but people who move it across the border illegally don't have to pay taxes on it.

The CBP Border Patrol also deals with people who have overstayed their visas — the official authorization that allows an alien to stay in a country for a specified amount of time.

"If someone has overstayed their visa, it is very similar to them coming over to the United States illegally," Calmes said. "It means they are living here on taxpayer dollars."

Responding to threats

The Border Patrol has 11 camera towers along the St. Clair River that were installed within the past four years. The cameras span the river from Port Huron to Gull Island in Lake St. Clair.

Personnel at Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Harrison Township constantly monitor video feeds from the cameras.

Each site has two camera bundles, Calmes said — one that looks upriver, and one that looks downriver. Each site also has day and night cameras.

"Agents respond to camera traffic if something looks suspicious," he said. "It's the people who are trying to come over to the United States by crossing the border somewhere other than a legal point of entry like the bridge that are a cause for concern."

Calmes said people sneaking across the river could possibly be members of terrorist groups, gang members, drug smugglers — or people overstaying their visas.

Calmes said each camera site was chosen based on traffic.

"The illegal points of entry are notorious locations and have been used since the 1930s," Calmes said. "The points are cyclical, and the most popular points rotate throughout the years."

He said there is a lot of illegal cross-border activity near Harsens Island and Algonac.

"One of the recent famous cases in the past couple years was down by Algonac," Calmes said. "A scuba diver was crossing the river underwater from Canada to the United States with marijuana."

"He served jail time for a year and is now back in Canada."

The Border Patrol has authority to arrest if given a cause and will hold potential criminals for evaluation.

"We have holding cells, but we don't hold anyone overnight," he said. "We typically call other departments that we collaborate with to take further action."

Standard procedures

On a day-to-day basis, the Marysville Patrol Station has eight to 18 agents on duty, patrolling 113 linear miles of liquid border that includes 41 miles of the St. Clair River and 72 miles of the border of Lake Huron.

Agents are on the road patrolling in their cars, on the water in boats and along the river on bicycles.

"We gather information by observing the community and having conversations," Calmes said. "We talk to marina owners, business owners and residents that live on the water because they are the ones who know best when things aren't normal. We are out there looking for things that aren't typical."

Calmes said one goal of the Border Patrol is to be fully integrated into the community.

"We are here for the 'what-if,'" Calmes said. "We patrol the roads and water looking for anything suspicious."

Calmes said agents often respond to suspicious water traffic the cameras detect, but many times find pleasure boaters who accidentally have crossed the international border.

"We watch on land and on water for nervous behavior, people who look out of place, people who don't speak English," he said. "These are all possible indicators of illegal immigrants."

"(On Sept. 23) we held four people in our cells," he said. "They were all illegally in our country, so what we do is put their information into our system, release them and send their information to another agency."

Calmes, who worked on the southwest border, said Border Patrol operations differ depending on location.

"When I worked in California my job was to track people, I would actually look for their footprints," he said. "You can't do that in Michigan unless it snows."

Marysville Station Supervisory Border Patrol Agent Sean Reynolds spends most of his time patrolling the water.

"In the summer I act as the marine supervisor," he said. "We are out on the waters every single day and patrol 41 miles of river."

Reynolds said he watches for boats landing without their lights on and people dropping off packages late at night.

"One of the biggest indicators we see of suspicious activity are boats landing without their lights on because they are trying to not call attention to themselves," he said.

When Reynolds is doing land patrol, he makes sure to check out areas such as state parks that are closed as well as secluded places where people should not be.

Law enforcement partners

The Border Patrol assists area police departments when possible, whether it is with extra manpower to patrol events or by providing backup at a traffic stop — and local law enforcement departments appreciate having the federal officers around.

Michael Reaves, director of the Port Huron Department of Public Safety, said they're an asset.

"We are an international port and border, and we do have illegals who cross all along the border, not just the bridge, and they are a key player in preventing that," he said.

Reaves said CBP Border Patrol is also part of Port Huron's neighborhood enforcement team, bringing more manpower to patrol the area.

Tom Konik, director of Marysville Department of Public Safety, said the agents increase law enforcement's presence in the area.

"Just having CBP agents out on the road where people can see them deters crimes," Konik said. "We also use them during large events to help patrol crowds like during the (St. Clair River) Float Down."

Konik said the large number of recreational boats poses a challenge for law enforcement.

"On an ocean, it's easier to track vessels because not as many recreational boats are on the waters," Konik said. "Here, it is hard to just watch on a camera to observe if those boats are just recreational boats or if they are suspicious."

"We really need CBP out on the water and observing first hand."

St. Clair Police Chief Richard Jefferson said illegal border crossings have fallen dramatically since the cameras were installed.

"People do still come across, but it has been cut down a lot since the cameras were installed," Jefferson said.

Part of the area

The Border Patrol began in 1924 as part of the nation's efforts to control illegal immigration and stop the flow of illegal alcohol across the border during Prohibition.

The first station in the area was in Port Huron.

Rep. Candice Miller, R-Harrison Township, said it has been her focus to expand CBP.

"When I first came to Congress, there were only a handful of Customs and Border Protection agents in the county, which serves as a high-traffic international border crossing. The Blue Water Bridge alone, the second busiest border crossing on the northern tier, accounts for a large portion of U.S.-Canada trade, worth over \$700 billion annually," she said in a statement. "CBP plays a critical role by protecting our borders and enforcing our nation's immigration laws, while also facilitating the flow of commerce vital to both our federal and national economy."

"Over the past 12 years, by working with the Department of Homeland Security, we have successfully increased the number of Custom and Border Protection assets and personnel along the border and within the county, including a new facility in Marysville and additional agents at the bridge," Miller said.

The focus of the Border Patrol has changed over the years as well.

"The Border Patrol was originally established to stop illegal immigrants," Calmes said. "From there it evolved into stopping bootleg rum from coming into our country. One of the first (Customs and Border Protection) officers ever shot and killed by liquor smugglers was in Algonac in 1929. The Algonac area is historically known as a target smuggling area."

Calmes said the routes smugglers used in the '30s are still being used today.

"Homeland Security saw a lot of traffic generated out of Toronto, since cartels are based out of big cities," Calmes said. "Since we have installed the cameras, we have seen less traffic, though, because the risk of being caught isn't worth the cost of their product.

"But that doesn't mean they have stopped," he said. "It means we have to find where they went."

Where rum-runners and bootleggers once moved illegal beer and liquor bound for Al Capone's establishments in Chicago, most of the smuggling today rotates between drugs and people, Calmes said.

The Detroit sector is now a point of transit for drug smuggling, he said.

"Products come up from Mexico through the southwest border and travel up here to the Detroit sector because our infrastructure provides easy transportation along major interstates that connect big cities like Chicago, Toledo and Detroit, and we are an international border as well," he said. "It's an easy route for inbound and outbound products to travel."

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