



Guardians of the gate

U.S. Customs and Border Protection is agriculture's first line of defense

By Steve Werblow

It's 3:30 in the morning, the darkest depths of an autumn night, when the first farmworkers start trickling into the Calexico West Port of Entry. A few revelers in party clothes weave through the border crossing, stumbling back into California after a night in Mexicali, the capital of Mexico's state of Baja California. But most of the crossers, who form a quiet line by 4:00 a.m., are dressed for the sun, toting lunch boxes, and clutching papers that will let them into the U.S. for work that day.

Beside the growing queue, Maribel Garcia sells steaming ham-and-cheese turnovers to the crowd, singing "Bolovanes! Bolo-vaa-nes!" to work up the workers' appetites. She rests her wares on the concrete block that marks the border between Mexico and the U.S. Every bit the international businesswoman, Garcia happily accepts either 13 pesos or \$1.25.

Drive time. Garcia reaches into her box, pulls out handfuls of bolovanes, and slips them through an iron fence to re-stock her friend, who is selling them to drivers in the auto lanes. At the head of one of the lines, Customs and Border Protection Officer Hedlund chats with drivers. His accent hints at his

►**Above:** At 4:30 a.m., CBP officers Hunt (left) and Bareto prepare to inspect a freight train; first a walk-through, then by gamma-ray. ►**Right:** Thousands of farmworkers start their commute before dawn.



►**Photo:** Open steel slats, reinforced by heavy mesh, make the 16-foot-high fence at Mexicali both a window and a wall.

childhood on a Midwestern farm. Then his questions quickly shift between English and Spanish as he asks where the drivers are from, where they're going, what they plan to do in the States. He watches for suspicious behavior. He listens for answers that don't seem quite right. He peers into most cars with his flashlight, looking for things that seem out of place. Sometimes he opens a door for a better look at the seats, or the interior panels. Often he checks the trunk for contraband, or people.

Chief Carmen Leal's radio crackles, and she heads back to her office. A woman in a hooded sweatshirt sits glumly in a government-issue office chair like a delinquent student in the

principal's office. She was caught with fraudulent documents, and Leal's team is running a database check on her to see if she's a fugitive or felon. Last year, 5,532 people were caught trying to cross at Calexico with bad papers; 210 of them were fugitives.

Bus stop. Meanwhile, farmworkers are streaming down Calexico's First Street. A fleet of white buses packs a dirt parking lot beside the border fence. Pickups line the road. Foremen watch the workers get on their buses, and their assistants lean on the hoods, checking off names on clipboards. Most workers head toward specific buses, riding with crews that stick together for months or years.

A petite woman named Mara hurries by. Her usual bus has already taken off for the

field, and she's trying to talk her way onto another crew so she doesn't miss a day of work.

Mara hops onto a bus. As dawn breaks, the last crews head to the lettuce fields of Yuma, Ariz., an hour's drive away. The crowd at the crossing is now a mix of blue- and white-collar workers and kids in school uniforms.

By the end of the day, 13,000 to 14,000 pedestrians and 17,000 cars cross into the U.S. at the Calexico West Port of Entry. Most are commuters. The newly built Calexico East Port of Entry outside of town will see 9,000 cars and 1,200 to 1,500 commercial trucks that day. It adds up in a hurry. In 2006, there were more than 23 million crossings at Calexico, including 10 million private cars, 311,000 truck and rail crossings, and 195,000 shipments of goods.

The men and women of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the guardians of the border, have a double-edged mission. They're on the lookout for threats to national security, illegal crossers, drugs, and other contraband.

They're also protecting the U.S. economy by keeping the border open. The steady flow of workers is vital to the Imperial Valley's \$270-million vegetable industry, and to billions of dollars' worth of crops around the nation. Half of Mexico's imports and 83% of its exports flow across the U.S. border, so trade both north and south is vital to both countries.

Disease disaster. Ensuring a smooth flow of goods doesn't leave room for error. In addition to 62,000 pounds of drugs nabbed at the Calexico border crossing in 2006 by CBP officers, CBP's agricultural inspectors seized 8,300 prohibited meats, plant materials, and animal products, and kept 207 agricultural pests out

►**1:** Border Patrol agents cover vast areas between ports of entry. ►**2:** This Border Patrol agent in Calexico reports two men jumping over the fence, then begins his pursuit.

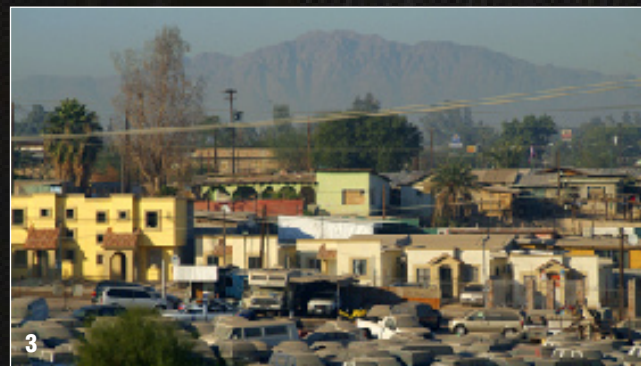
►**3:** Mexicali is home to 1 million residents; many cross the border to work or shop in the U.S. ►**4:** The official border sign serves as a table for pastry seller Maribel Garcia. ►**5:** From the Mexico side, Calexico's shiny water tower beckons.



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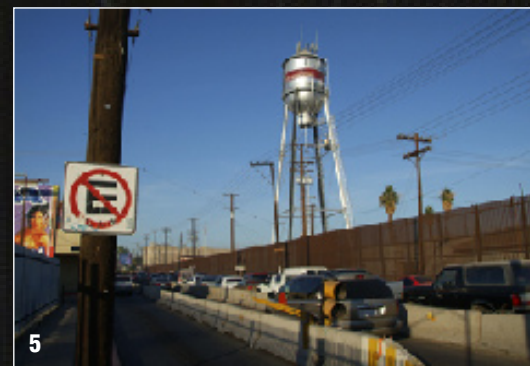
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►**Above:** In the desert west of Calexico, Border Patrol agents, electronic surveillance, and the harsh landscape make illegal crossing a risky—or deadly—endeavor.

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—Luis Perez

of the U.S., notes Jesus Solorzano, Agricultural Specialist Chief at Calexico. Mexican fruit fly, chrysanthemum white rust, or Exotic Newcastle Disease hitchhiking into the States on food, soil, or gifts could devastate entire industries or cripple regional economies.

Solorzano’s team of agriculture inspectors—re-assigned from the U.S. Department of Agriculture after 9/11 to form CBP with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and U.S. Customs—check everything from trailer-loads of produce to truck drivers’ lunch boxes.

CBP Agricultural Inspector Tellez brings a green onion into his crowded office in the truck docks at Calexico East. A veteran inspector with the enthusiasm of a rookie and the encyclopaedic knowledge of a graduate student, he studies the sample under a dissecting microscope and consults a loose-leaf binder that provides details on pests from around the world. Proper identification is a

must, and it’s gotten more complicated than ever. Goods from Asia are increasingly trans-shipped through Mexico, so inspectors need to consider that a suspicious insect may have originated in Shanghai rather than Sonora.

Solorzano says questionable samples are sent to a USDA expert in Ojai, Calif. for verification or positive identification, just to be sure.

Even empty trucks are carefully inspected. An inspector named Lozano crouches in an empty trailer, checking its corrugated floor for soil that could contain nematodes or pathogens. Later, he rejects a flatbed carrying irrigation pipe. The pipe was free of soil, but a makeshift wooden crate containing the sprinkler heads lacked a pre-treatment stamp on its lumber. Unfumigated, the box could be a haven for wood-destroying insects.

Many shipments are inspected before they even reach the border. USDA has crop inspectors in many Mexican fields, and CBP has officers in 50 countries to inspect U.S.-bound cargo. To speed the flow of trucks, both the U.S. and Mexico have developed systems to

expedite cross-border shipments through advance manifest reporting and pre-inspection.

Luis Perez, Assistant Port Director of Operations for Aduana (Customs) Mexico in Mexicali, meets regularly with his U.S. counterparts to collaborate on law enforcement actions and to maintain a smooth—and legal—flow of cargo across the border in both directions.

“The U.S. has problems with the people who want to go there,” he says. “We have problems with the smugglers who don’t want to pay taxes on merchandise they bring in.”

Gamma-ray. Perez says Mexican customs is investing in gamma-ray systems for the Mexicali crossing that peer into a trailer and show in an instant whether anything of a different density is hidden inside. CBP uses the same technology: all trains coming into Calexico pass under a massive gamma-ray inspection tower. Many trucks and even some passenger cars are also electronically inspected.

“A lot of people who come in illegally may come in a car trunk or other unsafe manner,” points out Calexico’s Assistant Port Director David Salazar as officers search parked cars.



►**Top:** Commuting and migrant farmworkers are vital parts of the ag economy. Careful screening at the border lets workers in while keeping threats out. ►**Above:** As dawn breaks, the last of the farmworker buses leaves Calexico for fields in California’s Imperial Valley or near Yuma, Ariz.

CBP discreetly refers to “non-factory compartments,” boxes hidden in nooks and crannies of cars. Sometimes they contain narcotics, sometimes people. In February 2007, Salazar’s team fished a Chinese national out from between the dashboard and firewall of a Mercury Sable. Days later, two more Chinese and an illegal Mexican immigrant were discovered in compartments beside car engines.

(Salazar points out that Mexicali’s large, historic Chinese-Mexican community makes it a prime launching point for illegal immigrants from China trying to enter the U.S.)

Life or death. As desert temperatures climb into triple digits in the summer, discovering hidden passengers suffocating in their hiding places becomes a life-or-death race.

Salazar explains that finding anything illegal—human or otherwise—is a product of



►**Above:** Foreign pests are a huge threat to the U.S. economy. Preventing the entry of the next Med fly, Asian longhorned beetle, or livestock pandemic is a key mission of the CBP’s agricultural inspectors.



►**Above:** Air Force veteran David Salazar joined CBP to pay for his last year of law school, and stayed to serve the country on the border. ►**Left:** Morning commuters line up at the border before sunrise.



►**Above:** Fieldwork is tough and the hours are long, but farm jobs in the U.S. sustain many border communities.

CBP's tiered enforcement strategy. Canine inspection teams rove through border traffic. All officers have radiation detectors clipped to their belts. They're so sensitive that they've been triggered by an agronomist's soil probe and cancer patients fresh from radiation therapy. Larger radiation detectors re-inspect all vehicles at the toll-booth-like checkpoints.

If anything in the primary inspection area raises an officer's suspicions, he or she directs the driver to the secondary inspection area. Officers there conduct a 7-point inspection of the vehicle. A German shepherd hops in and out of the car, barking and clawing when she smells people, drugs, or bombs. Her handler may then direct the car to the X-ray area.

Salazar climbs into the X-ray unit, an RV with an outrigger that reaches easily over a line of parked cars. A ghostly image floats across a monitor as the van creeps slowly. Each car's contents are strikingly well-defined.

"It really makes you jump the first time you see a body appear on the screen," Salazar says.

Even with about 18,000 CBP officers at ports of entry, nearly 13,000 Border Patrol agents in the areas between border crossings, more than 2,000 ag specialists, and a toolbox filled with motion sensors, cameras, and aerial drones, the nation's largest uniformed law enforcement agency faces a mammoth challenge.

Huge job. CBP covers more than 1,900 miles of border with Mexico, another 5,000 miles with Canada, 95,000 miles of coastline, and hundreds of seaports and airports. In all, CBP teams check more than a million entrants and about 80,000 shipments daily, screening for everything from bombs to beetles.

Keeping the U.S.-Mexico border safe and productive requires a delicate balance. "Mexico stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States regarding the security of America and the need to ensure that the border is not used by terrorists or terrorist organizations wanting to harm either country," says spokesman Rafael Laveaga at the Embassy of Mexico in Washington, DC. "At the same time, we need to guarantee not to seal the border to the flows of people and goods that cross into the United States in a legal manner. The border should be a secure and prosperous area for the communities living on both sides."

Between those communities, where national security, international relations, and prosperity are on the line every day, CBP guards the gate. Notes Salazar, "These are the unsung heroes of what goes on to protect the country." ■

"As a new officer, there's a new story every day."

—David Salazar