

TRAINING KEY FOR HARBOR PATROL IN BIG POT BUST; 1,278 pounds of marijuana seized and two Mexican nationals arrested Sunday

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Body

ABSTRACT

mb SAN CLEMENTE The arrest of two Mexican nationals after their boat was found with 1,278 pounds of marijuana off San Clemente State Beach on Sunday, Sept. 10 was a result of stepped-up training by deputies and lifeguards who monitor the Orange County coastline, officials said. San Clemente city lifeguards saw the boat sitting 50 yards off Calafia Beach early Sunday...

FULL TEXT

SAN CLEMENTE >> The arrest of two Mexican nationals after their boat was found with 1,278 pounds of marijuana off San Clemente State Beach on Sunday was a result of stepped-up training by deputies and lifeguards who monitor the Orange County coastline, officials said.

San Clemente city lifeguards saw the boat sitting 50 yards off Calafia Beach early Sunday and called San Clemente State Lifeguards, said Rich Haydon, superintendent of state parks.

"It just didn't look right," Haydon said. "You have a small craft, a little cabin cruiser that fits the profile of possible smugglers. It was anchored right off a beach that was secluded and close to the freeway. We called in Harbor Patrol."

The smuggling incident was the second in a year and a half in San Clemente. In December 2016, a boat came ashore at San Clemente State Beach with more than 2,000 pounds of marijuana. The U.S. Border Patrol took the marijuana from the abandoned boat. No one was arrested in the incident.

In 2012, 8,000 pounds of marijuana bales were found in the water off Dana Point. In 2013, the U.S. Coast Guard spotted a sailboat just off Balboa Island and found more than a ton of marijuana aboard.

Officials say increased training and vigilance by Harbor Patrol deputies, state and federal agencies has led to fewer contraband landing attempts off the Orange County coastline. The training, part of the Operation Stonegarden Program, educates law enforcement personnel in smuggling trends.

Most landings are now reported at secluded beaches north of Los Angeles, officials said.

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On Sunday, two Harbor Patrol deputies arrived around 8:15 a.m. and went up alongside the boat to check on passengers. They saw a man sitting behind the wheel of the boat asleep, said Sgt. Paul Ketcham.

Deputies inquired if the man was all right but he didn't speak English, so one of the deputies addressed him in Spanish, Ketcham said.

Then another man emerged from below. In the meantime, deputies had called in the boat's identification number and realized it was registered in Arizona to a person living in Florida.

"This seemed unusual to the deputies," Ketcham said.

When the boat driver threw his handheld GPS device and phone into the water, things became more tense, Ketcham said. Deputies asked the men to open the locked cubby and saw large square-shaped packages wrapped in plastic inside the cabin.

They called for backup from Harbor Patrol in Newport Beach and asked for Duke, the Orange County Sheriff Department's helicopter, to fly over the scene. San Clemente State Lifeguards also came out on their boat and an armed lifeguard climbed on board.

Deputies recovered the 1,278 pounds of marijuana in bundles lining the boat's interior, Ketcham said.

The men, identified only as 42-year-old and 49-year-old Mexican nationals, were arrested on suspicion of possession/transportation of marijuana for sale and were booked into Orange County jail, officials said.

"Deputies are trained to look for trends and pleasure crafts seem to be used more and more frequently for smuggling as opposed to pangas," he said.

Locations are also critical giveaways, he said.

"Are the boats in a spot where they can quickly access roads?" he said. "Smugglers often look for places like Calafia that have easy access to roads and are secluded."

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