

Illegal Immigrants Feeding Wildfire Epidemic in California

The Washington Post

June 07, 1996, Friday, Final Edition

Copyright 1996 The Washington Post

Section: A SECTION; Pg. A03

Length: 738 words

Byline: William Claiborne, Washington Post Staff Writer

Dateline: LOS ANGELES, June 6

Body

Illegal immigrants who hike through the rugged forested mountains of eastern San Diego County after making it across the border are causing a dramatic surge in **wildfires** because of fires they light when camping out in the area, state and county officials said today.

In some cases, the **illegal immigrants**, hoping to use the isolation of the mountains to work their way north, are at serious risk of being hurt or killed by **wildfires** they helped start.

The number of **wildfires** in the region since January is already four times last year's total, a frightening jump that has prompted the San Diego County Board of Supervisors to declare a state of emergency and ask President Clinton to deploy U.S. troops near the border to prevent the **immigrants** from entering the forests.

"It's a disaster waiting to happen," said Diane Jacob, a member of the Board of Supervisors representing eastern San Diego County. "I don't think it's a matter of if we have a major human catastrophe. It's a case of when, if something isn't done immediately."

Ken Miller, regional fire chief for the **California** Forestry Department, said 212 **wildfires** have broken out in the border area around Otay Mountain this year, at a cost of \$ 3 million in firefighting efforts. Last year, 64 fires were reported in the same area, and in 1994 there were only 24.

This year's increase coincides with a crackdown by the U.S. Border Patrol on a flat border region closer to the Pacific Coast, which has forced human cargo smugglers to turn to the mountainous area further east in their efforts to reach Los Angeles and inland cities. The surge in fires also has been caused by near-drought conditions that have dried ground cover to highly inflammable tinder, Miller said.

Miller said that up to 2,600 **illegal immigrants** cross the **California** border each day, and that increasing numbers of them are heading to the rugged mountains to avoid Border Patrol checkpoints on northbound highways along the Pacific coast.

The **immigrants** normally live in the wilderness one to four days, usually sleeping during the day and hiking at night. They often build their campfires amid vegetation that grows to 12 feet high and then leave them unattended when they move on, Miller said.

The fire chief said he had been told by Border Patrol agents that sometimes the **immigrants** intentionally start **wildfires** to create a diversion when they think they have been detected.

Traveling in groups of up to 120 people, the **immigrants** are led by paid guides, called "coyotes," into the wilderness and often are unaware that **wildfires** are raging near the smuggling trails, Miller said.

Illegal Immigrants Feeding Wildfire Epidemic in California

"If someone who is unfamiliar with the steep topography of that area crosses a firebreak into a dangerous zone, there's no way they could get out without being seriously burned or killed," he said. "They'll be in a position where we can't do anything to help them because we don't have the resources to get our people in there."

Karen Terrill, a spokeswoman for the Forestry Department in Sacramento, said: "They [immigrants] have no idea that fires run faster uphill than on level ground or on a downward slope. It's virtually impossible to outrun a wildfire uphill. This has the potential of becoming a firefighter's nightmare."

Miller said that on any given night, there are 300 to 400 illegal immigrants in the mountains and canyons along the border, many of them near the fires that burn almost daily this time of year. He said he has a video showing a large group of immigrants hiking with no apparent concern near a wildfire with flames up to 16 feet high. "What they didn't know is they could have been surrounded in a moment and never gotten out," he said.

Jacob said the supervisors are writing letters to Clinton, Gov. Pete Wilson (R) and Attorney General Janet Reno warning of the potential for a catastrophe. Besides asking for U.S. and National Guard troops to patrol the area, she said the supervisors also want relief from federal environmental regulations that have prevented forestry officials from building roads through federal lands, so firefighters can reach fires before they spread and also rescue trapped immigrants.

"The irony is that hundreds of illegal immigrants are literally trashing this federally protected wilderness, but our firefighters can't even access it to rescue them because of the environmental restrictions," Jacob said.

Graphic

Map, The Washington Post

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (91%); IMMIGRATION (90%); FIRES (90%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); MOUNTAINS (90%); FOREST FIRES (90%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); HIKING (89%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (89%); SMUGGLING (89%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (89%); NATURAL DISASTERS (78%); FORESTS & WOODLANDS (78%); ENVIRONMENTAL ACCIDENTS & DISASTERS (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); COUNTIES (78%); COUNTY GOVERNMENT (78%); BOARDS OF DIRECTORS (75%); DROUGHT (73%); STATES OF EMERGENCY (73%); BURN INJURIES (71%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (68%); ARMED FORCES (54%)

Company: u.s. border patrol; san diego; san diego county board of supervisors US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%); san diego; san diego county board of supervisors US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%); san diego county board of supervisors US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%); US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%)

Organization: US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%); US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%); u.s. border patrol; san diego; san diego county board of supervisors US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%); san diego; san diego county board of supervisors US CUSTOMS & BORDER

Illegal Immigrants Feeding Wildfire Epidemic in California

PROTECTION (82%); san diego county board of supervisors US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%);
US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (82%)

Industry: ARMED FORCES (54%)

Geographic: SAN DIEGO, CA, USA (93%); LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (79%); **CALIFORNIA**, USA (92%); PACIFIC
OCEAN (70%); UNITED STATES (92%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: June 7, 1996

End of Document