



- Home
- News
- Today's Paper
- Sports
- Classifieds
- Shopping
- Services
- Entertainment
- Visitor Info

[Advertising Info](#) [About Us](#) [Contact SignOn](#) [Membership](#) [Site Index](#)

Sunday

- News
- Local News
- Insight
- Business
- Sports
- Sunday Currents
- Arts
- Travel
- Home
- The Last Week
- Sunday
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday

Union-Tribune Editorial

Border lines

Add agents, technology to avoid gridlock

October 28, 2001

With visitors from Mexico spending nearly \$3 billion a year in San Diego County, local leaders should be working hard to get Congress to allocate more money for border-crossing resources, now that heightened security is choking the flow of goods and people.

Over the last decade, Congress has beefed up the Border Patrol whenever constituents complained about illegal immigration. But lawmakers have largely ignored the needs of legal border-crossing inspection by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U.S. Customs Service.

Because the ports of entry at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa aren't fully staffed around the clock, and because the federal government has neglected to invest in technology that could make border crossing more secure and faster, there now are longer lines than ever as inspectors struggle to prevent terrorists from entering the country.

Businesses are hurting, and it's going to get worse.

A recent survey of 51 companies in southern San Diego County by the consulting group **Crossborder Business Associates** found that three-quarters reported a drop in sales since Sept. 11. In particular, convenience shopping, in which people cross the border for a quick trip to pick up a few items, is all but dead.

This economic slowdown isn't just hurting big chains' stores near the border, such as Longs Drugs or WalMart. But in a foreshadowing of a widening downturn, many big retailers say they probably won't be hiring seasonal staff for the holidays, according to Crossborder Business Associates. Not only will retail sales be down, but so will employment.

Stores in San Ysidro won't be the only ones hurt. Big retailers throughout San Diego will feel the reduction in Mexican shoppers, too.

Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, is calling for the declaration of an economic state of emergency along the border, which would allow low-interest loans for businesses so they can stay open. He and others also are urging Congress to allocate a measly \$6 million to fully staff San Diego County's border stations around the clock, to speed up traffic and increase security.



Congress must fully staff the border, but it needs to do much more than that. It needs to seriously invest in improved technology at our border crossings. If the federal government is going to spend hundreds of millions making our airports more secure, it needs to do the same at our land ports.

For example, INS and Customs agents are spending a huge amount of time scrutinizing frequent crossers, people who traverse the border every day for work. Most of the 50 million who cross at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa each year actually are the same people crossing again and again. Instead of having agents check them each day, we could install facial recognition technology that creates a digital image of your iris -- each as individual as a fingerprint -- and stores it in a database. Frequent crossers would stand in front of an eye scanner for a few seconds before being granted access through the checkpoint.

Other technology exists to create secure visas and to ensure that cargo hasn't been tampered with since it left its factory or warehouse. But Congress never has cared much about the border.

We can have both more secure and more efficient border crossings. Currently, we have neither, and INS and Customs officials are not at fault. The fault lies with our nation's lawmakers, for whom border security and border economics have never been a priority.

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