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GAO

United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-275475

September 30, 1997

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate

Subject: Customs Service: Information on Southwest Border Drug Enforcement Operations

Dear Senator Feinstein:

You asked us to undertake a review of the drug enforcement operations of the U.S. Customs Service along the Southwest border of the United States. As we recently agreed with your office, our preliminary work on the issues you raised indicated that we should concentrate on Customs' (1) methodology for allocating resources for drug enforcement activities, (2) internal controls and inspection requirements for cargo entry processes, and (3) internal controls and safeguards that are in place for records in the Treasury Enforcement Communications System. Our work on these three issues is continuing and will be reported to you separately.

Also as agreed with your office, we prepared this letter to document the information we obtained on the other issues you raised. In summary, the issues and the information we obtained are:

- Customs' emphasis on its drug enforcement mission: The Commissioner and other Customs officials emphasized Customs' drug enforcement programs to Customs employees in a variety of ways and on many occasions.

- Customs' processes for training inspectors: Customs trains its inspectors initially at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center at Glynco, Georgia. This 11-week course includes classes on drug interdiction responsibilities. Other training in drug interdiction methods is provided at the Customs facility at Laredo, Texas, to focus on interdiction problems and methods on the Southwest border.

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- Data on Customs' cocaine seizures at commercial ports of entry along the Southwest border: Customs made a total of 23 seizures of cocaine, totaling more than 20,000 pounds, at 6 of the 24 commercial cargo ports of entry during fiscal years 1994 through 1996. There were no cocaine seizures at the other 18 commercial cargo ports of entry.

- The development and use of drug information: Customs' intelligence operations were recently restructured. About 25 percent of the narcotics seizures made by Customs from commercial cargo crossing the Southwest border was attributed to prior information in fiscal year 1996. According to Customs officials, prior information includes not only intelligence leads but also information obtained from other sources, such as informants.

- The vulnerability of inspectors' radio communications systems: Prior to the mid-1980s, Customs' communications systems were vulnerable to interception by drug smugglers because they operated in a "clear" mode, but current systems can be encrypted and, according to Customs officials, are not believed to be vulnerable to interception when operating in the encrypted mode.

- Actions addressing the problem of "spotters" (i.e., individuals who observe patterns of Customs inspections and pass them along to smugglers): Customs officials have recognized the problem of spotters and have implemented several initiatives at key ports of entry intended to reduce the problem.

- The performance of the truck X-ray system:[1] Two truck X-ray systems are currently in operation (one recently installed). The use of the first truck X-ray system resulted in more than 120 seizures of narcotics (almost 24,000 pounds) from September 1994 through July 1997.

Enclosure I contains the information that we developed on each of these issues in response to your request. As agreed with your office, we do not plan any further work on these issues at this time.

In developing the information in enclosure I, we (1) interviewed key officials and reviewed budget, personnel, and program documents at Customs' headquarters and at three Customs Management Centers located along the Southwest border and (2) visited three ports of entry–Otay Mesa, California; Laredo; and Nogales, Arizona–where we observed drug interdiction operations; interviewed port officials and inspectors; and obtained, reviewed, and analyzed data on workload and performance. We did not independently verify these data. We also interviewed three Special Agents-in-Charge from Customs' Office of Investigations and visited the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia for information on Customs' training activities.

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[1]The truck X-ray system provides X-ray images of full-size tractor trailers, tanker trucks, other types of commercial vehicles, and automobiles.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OUR EVALUATION

We requested comments on a draft of this letter from the Secretary of the Treasury or his designees. On September 12, 1997, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Tariffs and Trade and other Department of the Treasury and Customs officials provided us with their oral comments on the draft. These officials generally agreed with the contents of the draft letter and provided technical comments and clarifications. We have incorporated the comments in this letter where appropriate.

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We hope this information is helpful to you. We will make a copy of this letter available to other interested parties on request. Major contributors to this letter are listed in enclosure II. If you or your staff have any questions about the information in this letter, please contact me on (202) 512-8777 or Darryl Dutton, Assistant Director, on (213) 830-1000.

Sincerely yours,

Norman Rabkin

Norman J. Rabkin
Director, Administration
of Justice Issues

Enclosures - 2

INFORMATION ON THE CUSTOMS SERVICE'S SOUTHWEST BORDER DRUG ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONS

BACKGROUND

Created in 1789, the U.S. Customs Service is one of the federal government's oldest agencies. Although its original mission was to collect revenue, Customs' mission has expanded to include ensuring that all goods and persons entering and exiting the United States do so in accordance with all U.S. laws and regulations. Moreover, a major goal of Customs is to prevent the smuggling of drugs into the country by creating an effective drug interdiction, intelligence, and investigation capability that disrupts and dismantles smuggling organizations.

As of January 1997, Customs performed its mission with a workforce of about 19,500 personnel at the following locations: Customs headquarters in Washington, D.C., and 20 Customs Management Centers, 20 Special Agent-in-Charge offices, and 301 ports of entry around the country. Of the 301 ports, 24 are located along the Southwest border and–through 39 crossing points–handle both passengers and commercial cargo entering the United States. Customs collects revenues in excess of $23 billion annually while processing the estimated 14 million import entries and 450 million people entering the country each year.

In September 1996, we issued a report on Customs' drug interdiction efforts.[2] As 1 of the more than 50 federal agencies involved in the national drug control effort, Customs is responsible for stopping the flow of illegal drugs through the nation's ports of entry. In addition to routine inspections to search passengers, cargo, and conveyances[3] for illegal drugs moving through U.S. ports, Customs' drug interdiction program includes investigations and other activities unique to specific ports.

Our September 1996 report identified and described the key elements, resources, costs, and performance measures of Customs' national drug interdiction program as well as those of its investigative offices and selected ports in the Miami, Florida, and San Diego, California, areas. The report also described drug interdiction activities at the Miami and San Diego area ports, including information on the ports, estimates of the resources Customs had invested in drug interdiction and investigative activities at the ports, and traditional measures of these activities' success.

Our report also discussed the challenges Customs was facing in its drug interdiction mission. We pointed out that Customs' major challenge was to effectively carry out its drug interdiction and trade enforcement missions while at the same time facilitating the flow of persons and cargo across the borders. Customs has to perform these missions

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[2]Customs Service: Drug Interdiction Efforts (GAO/GGD-96-189BR, Sept. 26, 1996).

[3]Conveyances include cars, buses, trucks, aircraft, and vessels.

despite continuous and extensive threats from drug smugglers along the Southwest border.

Finally, we noted in the September 1996 report that Customs, just as other law enforcement agencies engaged in the fight against drug smuggling, has attempted to develop performance measures. Traditional output measures, such as the number of drug seizures, do not allow officials to gauge the overall effectiveness of drug interdiction activities. Even the new, nontraditional measures being developed (e.g., estimating the number of drug smugglers entering the ports) may not allow Customs to assess, over time, whether increased efforts are producing better outcomes, our report concluded.

The ports of entry that we visited during this work–Laredo, Texas; Otay Mesa, California; and Nogales, Arizona–were three of the busiest on the Southwest border in terms of the numbers of vehicles and commodities entering the United States each day. The ports also processed a diverse mixture of imports, including produce, television sets, and liquor.

- Laredo consists of two separate cargo facilities: the downtown Laredo facility and a newer facility approximately 22 miles west, the Columbia Bridge facility; combined, they form the busiest commercial cargo port on the Southwest border. For the purposes of this review, we focused only on the operations of the Laredo facility, the busiest of the two facilities. During fiscal year 1996, the Laredo facility handled about 732,000 vehicles (465,625 laden and 266,826 empty), which was an average of 2,007 vehicles per day.[4] The Laredo facility processed a variety of commodities during the year, including produce, apparel, auto parts, steel, chemical products, and liquor, as well as large amounts of hazardous materials (e.g., chemicals and flammable liquids). The 2 Laredo cargo facilities had a total of 113 dock spaces (13 at the Laredo facility and 100 at the Columbia Bridge facility) available for Customs to examine trucks and cargo and, as of July 1997, had a combined staff of 82 Customs inspectors, canine enforcement officers, and supervisors (49 at the Laredo facility and 33 at the Columbia Bridge facility). The Laredo facility is located 154 miles south of San Antonio, Texas.

- Otay Mesa has been the third busiest commercial cargo port on the Southwest border. In fiscal year 1996, Otay Mesa handled over 516,000 vehicles (258,711 laden and 257,543 empty), which was an average of 1,422 vehicles per day. Otay Mesa processed a mixture of cargo, including produce, television sets, and electronic components. Over 100 dock spaces were available for Customs inspections and, as of July 1997, Otay Mesa had 110 inspectors, canine enforcement officers, and supervisors. The port is located about 15 miles south of San Diego.

- Nogales, the fifth busiest commercial cargo port on the Southwest border, handled about 208,000 vehicles (154,259 laden and 53,503 empty) during fiscal year 1996,

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[4]The average number of vehicles per year reflects the traffic average over an 1-year period, which includes both weekdays, when the volume of traffic is much higher, and weekends, when traffic volume is much lower.

which was an average of 572 vehicles per day. Nogales had 92 dock spaces dedicated to Customs inspections and, as of April 1997, had a staff of 27 inspectors, canine enforcement officers, and supervisors. Nogales processed a variety of industrial commodities during the year, such as auto parts and medical products; however, in winter, the majority of its cargo was produce. The port is located 67 miles south of Tucson, Arizona.

CUSTOMS' EMPHASIS ON ITS DRUG ENFORCEMENT MISSION

The Commissioner and other Customs officials provided direction to their personnel regarding Customs' drug enforcement mission in a variety of ways. First, in his fiscal year 1997 Customs Annual Plan message to Customs employees, the Commissioner identified drug enforcement as an area of the agency's primary emphasis and detailed a strategy to combat drug smuggling. The strategy called for, among other things, (1) an increase in resources for "Operation Hard Line";[5] (2) the development and use of intelligence; and (3) the development and implementation of drug interdiction technologies, such as truck X-ray systems.

Second, Customs' draft strategic plan–required by the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-62)–for fiscal years 1997 to 2002 identifies the continuing threat of narcotics smuggling as one of its unique challenges as it prepares to enter the next century. The strategic plan recognizes that the smuggling of narcotics into the United States has no simple or immediate solutions and presents a goal and a number of objectives designed to continue Customs' multipronged enforcement effort to increase the risk of being caught smuggling into the country.

Third, the Commissioner and other Customs officials issued during 1995 and 1996 at least four memorandums to the ports of entry that identified and emphasized drug enforcement as a priority. For example, in a June 1996 memorandum to Southwest border port directors, the Assistant Commissioner for Field Operations directed that, as part of a continuing emphasis on drug enforcement, Customs inspectors were to increase and intensify the examination of vehicles.

Fourth, the Commissioner visited Southwest border ports of entry during 16 trips from June 1993 to October 1996. According to Customs officials and trip summaries, during his visits the Commissioner (1) inspected drug enforcement operations; (2) met with special agents and inspectors, conveying to them the importance of Customs' drug enforcement mission; and (3) presented awards to Customs personnel for successful drug seizures.

Fifth, the Commissioner and other Customs officials testified before Congress at least 12 times between March 1996 and May 1997, emphasizing Customs' drug enforcement priority and detailing specific actions being taken to implement the priority.

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[5]Operation Hard Line is Customs' effort to address border violence and drug smuggling through intensified inspections, improved facilities, and technology.

Finally, in at least 23 administrative messages that were sent to Customs personnel between February 1996 and November 1996, the Commissioner, among other things, emphasized Customs' drug enforcement priority, identified significant drug seizures, and recognized those responsible for these seizures.

CUSTOMS' PROCESSES FOR TRAINING INSPECTORS

Basic training for Customs inspectors consists of an 11-week course that is given at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Glynco, Georgia. According to FLETC training officials, inspectors are to be sent to FLETC as soon as possible after being hired, although some may have had on-the-job training (OJT) before they attend the basic training course. The Customs Program Manager at FLETC stated that, although some classes in the basic training focus specifically on drug interdiction, the majority of the classes are intended to provide inspectors with the basic knowledge and practice necessary to enforce all of Customs' responsibilities. General basic training classes include firearms, physical training, and Customs law. Once FLETC training is completed, Customs assigns the inspectors to various ports of entry where they are expected to augment the basics learned with structured OJT, according to FLETC officials.

In addition, inspectors assigned to cargo ports of entry along the Southwest border are to receive specific training in drug interdiction methods. This training, which, beginning in fiscal year 1997, is a 6-day course called "Southern Border Interdiction Training" (SBIT), is given at Customs' Columbia Bridge cargo facility in Laredo. According to the head of Customs' Office of Field Operations, the SBIT program provides individualized instruction on the proper techniques in targeting high-risk cargo and conveyances and performing quality drug interdiction examinations. Officials in Customs' Anti-smuggling Division told us that SBIT is taught by field subject matter experts and is basic enough to be beneficial to inspectors new to the cargo environment, but also advanced enough to benefit the more experienced inspectors. The course blends classroom training with practical field exercises, and the curriculum includes the following:

- cargo concealment and examination techniques;
- technology training, such as the use of the pallet X ray, X-ray van, and fiber-optic scopes, to examine gas tanks and other enclosed spaces; and
- hands-on experience with actual cargo being imported at the Columbia Bridge cargo facility.

Between January 1994 and May 1997, 952 Customs inspectors and Canine Enforcement Officers attended SBIT, according to the FLETC Program Manager. Customs' goal is to hold at least 10 SBIT programs each fiscal year and train approximately 240 inspectors per year. According to Customs officials, this will ensure that approximately 10 percent of Customs inspectors and canine enforcement officers along the Southwest border are trained each year. Also according to these officials, since 952 inspectors and canine

enforcement officers have been trained and 40 training classes have been held since fiscal year 1994, these goals have already been exceeded.

CUSTOMS' COCAINE SEIZURES AT COMMERCIAL PORTS OF ENTRY ALONG THE SOUTHWEST BORDER

As shown in table I.1, Customs made a total of 4 cocaine seizures in fiscal year 1994, 6 cocaine seizures in fiscal year 1995, and 13 cocaine seizures in fiscal year 1996 at 6 commercial cargo ports of entry along the Southwest border. There were no cocaine seizures at the other 18 commercial cargo ports along the Southwest border during fiscal years 1994 through 1996. During the same period, Customs also made 70 marijuana seizures totaling 46,561 pounds at 12 of the 24 commercial cargo ports, as well as an unspecified number of seizures of other controlled substances, such as methamphetamine. According to Customs officials, because of inconsistent identification criteria in their drug seizure databases, they were unable to determine the exact number, location, and weight of the other controlled substance seizures.

Table I.1: Number and Weight of Cocaine Seizures at Southwest Border Commercial Cargo Ports of Entry, Fiscal Years 1994 through 1996

	Number and weight of cocaine seizures on the Southwest border, by fiscal year		
Commercial cargo port of entry	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**
Laredo, Texas	0	0	1 (2,301 pounds)
Calexico, California	4 (1,765 pounds)	1 (18 pounds)	0
Brownsville, Texas	0	3 (380 pounds)	4 (5,479 pounds)
Nogales, Arizona	0	1 (2,596 pounds)	5 (3,526 pounds)
Hidalgo, Texas	0	0	2 (1,768 pounds)
Rio Grande City, Texas	0	1 (169 pounds)	1 (2,040 pounds)
Total seizures	**4**	**6**	**13**
Total weight	**1,765 pounds**	**3,163 pounds**	**15,114 pounds**

Source: GAO analysis of Customs data.

Commenting on the lack of cocaine seizures at the Otay Mesa port of entry during this period, a Customs official at the port and Customs' Deputy Special Agent-in-Charge of its San Diego office told us that significant quantities of cocaine were probably not being

smuggled through the port. This view was generally supported by officials of the Southwest Border High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program[6] in San Diego. HIDTA officials told us that the fact that there were few sizeable cocaine seizures may mean that enforcement efforts at the ports of entry were deterring cocaine smugglers and diverting them to routes between the ports where the risk of interdiction may be lower. According to these officials, drug smugglers do not want to risk losing large cocaine loads, which are often transported in commercial cargo, because they realize that prosecution guidelines require stiffer penalties for larger volume seizures. In addition, HIDTA officials suspect that drug smugglers frequently use the "shotgun" approach to smuggling cocaine. This approach means that the smugglers are moving small quantities through the passenger ports and later consolidating these loads at "stash houses" across the border for distribution.

CUSTOMS' DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF DRUG INFORMATION

According to the Director of Customs' Intelligence and Communications Division, Customs has restructured its intelligence operations. The restructuring was begun in 1995 and was intended to systematize the gathering, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence. Under the new structure, a National Analysis Operations Center at Customs headquarters is to be responsible for (1) setting intelligence priorities; (2) establishing programs to implement those priorities; (3) coordinating with various field intelligence units; and (4) overseeing the overall narcotics intelligence gathering, analysis, and dissemination process.

In the field, five Area Intelligence Units (AIU)–in Miami; New York, New York; Houston, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Los Angeles, California–are to develop intelligence on matters such as narcotics smuggling and money laundering. AIUs are to also support intelligence units at ports of entry. AIUs are to gather data from internal Customs sources and local law enforcement agencies, analyze these data, and transmit their analyses to the field units. In addition, eight Intelligence Collection and Analysis Teams at the port-of-entry level along the Southwest border are to develop and provide intelligence information to both the investigative and inspectional operations at the ports. Finally, the Technical Intelligence Branch has been reorganized and its mission expanded to include supporting special border operations and the Office of Internal Affairs.

According to the Director of Customs' Intelligence and Communications Division, Customs obtains intelligence on drug smuggling from a variety of internal and external sources. Internal sources include case and seizure reports and other Customs-collected information. External sources include informants; the Drug Enforcement Administration; and air, sea, and rail company security offices. Customs' reports on narcotics seizures at

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[6]HIDTA is a designation given by the Office of National Drug Control Policy to areas of the country that are heavily impacted by drug trafficking. Funds are provided to HIDTA areas to supplement and improve the collective efforts of local, state, and federal law enforcement to interdict, investigate, and prosecute drug traffickers.

commercial cargo ports for fiscal year 1996 show that Customs used "prior information" to make a number of such seizures. According to Customs officials, prior information includes not only intelligence leads but also information obtained from other sources, such as informants. Accordingly, in fiscal year 1996, 42 percent of all narcotics seizures–48 percent of all cocaine and 29 percent of all marijuana seizures–made by Customs from commercial cargo was attributed to prior information. For the Southwest border, 23 percent of all commercial cargo narcotics seizures in fiscal year 1996, including 38 percent of the cocaine seizures, was attributed to prior information. These seizures included an 1,158-pound cocaine seizure in Nogales. The cocaine was found in a shipment of transformers after the port's Document Analysis Unit (DAU) determined that the shipment had the same destination as an earlier one that had also resulted in a cocaine seizure.[7]

VULNERABILITY OF INSPECTORS' RADIO COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS

According to the Director of Customs' National Law Enforcement Communications Center (NLECC), Customs' radio communications systems are not believed to be vulnerable to interception by drug smugglers or others with scanner capabilities. Since the mid-1980s, Customs has employed a radio network that uses a National Security Agency-endorsed privacy mode. According to the Director, the NLECC is unaware of any interception of a Customs radio communication when the Digital Encryption System (DES) voice privacy feature is utilized. DES employs "white noise" (static) bursts to encrypt transmissions.

Before the implementation of the privacy mode, Customs' radio communications operated in the "clear" transmission mode. According to Customs internal investigations in the mid-1980s, the interception of "open" radio communications by smugglers caused the death or injury of Customs personnel in two separate incidents. In one incident, a Customs enforcement officer on stakeout on the Southwest border was shot and killed by drug smugglers. An internal investigation determined that his radio communications were intercepted and contributed significantly to his death. In a second incident, two Customs agents on surveillance in Puerto Rico were fired upon and seriously injured. An internal investigation concluded that their radio communications also had been intercepted.

CUSTOMS' ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF "SPOTTERS"

The spotter problem involves narcotics smuggling organizations' use of individuals, who are known as spotters, to observe Customs enforcement activities at the ports of entry. The smuggling organizations' ability to observe Customs activities may allow them to take advantage of what they consider to be "windows of opportunity" (e.g., times when the

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[7]DAUs at Customs' commercial cargo facilities are responsible for targeting cargo for intensive examinations to detect narcotic smuggling and other violations of law. Among other things, the DAU examines and analyzes shipping documents and reviews intelligence information.

truck X-ray system is not operating or when enforcement actions, such as "block blitzes,"[8] have been temporarily suspended) to smuggle narcotics through the ports.

In 1996, the Commissioner toured many of the Southwest border ports of entry and directly experienced the magnitude of the spotter problem. As a result, on March 21, 1996, he directed that a comprehensive study be conducted to address the spotter situation. Each of the ports of entry and Investigations offices along the Southwest border were to establish teams to identify the spotter problem, report to Customs headquarters on the severity of the problem, and propose solutions to the problem.

We obtained "spotter initiatives" from the three ports that we visited: Otay Mesa, Laredo, and Nogales. The initiatives contained local spotter threat assessments, suggested solutions, and requests for funds to enhance facilities and to purchase equipment as described below.

Otay Mesa's Spotter Initiative

Internal and external spotters had been problems at Otay Mesa, according to the March 29, 1996, spotter initiative. For internal spotters, Customs personnel often noticed an increase in activity by non-Customs personnel, such as drivers and brokers, when an enforcement action, such as a block blitz, was initiated. The non-Customs personnel overtly positioned themselves to observe Customs' efforts and used radios and cellular phones to communicate the activities to individuals outside of the port. The external spotters took advantage of a chain-link fence surrounding the compound to observe inside activities by using binoculars, radios, cellular telephones, and cameras. Customs personnel attempted to contact and ascertain the purposes of the internal and external surveillances but were not able to effectively stop the activities.

Otay Mesa's spotter initiative included several proposals to deter spotters, including enhancing the chain-link fence by adding green inserts to obstruct viewing into the compound, completely enclosing the inspection area with the green inserts, and enclosing the truck X ray in its own corrugated metal fence and canopy to more effectively shield enforcement activity from internal spotter observation.

As of March 1997, several equipment items and other enhancements, including the green inserts to the chain-link fence, had been requested from Customs procurement at an approximate cost of $78,000. The spotter initiative did not include information on measures of effectiveness for the proposed solutions.

Laredo's Spotter Initiative

The port of Laredo's April 12, 1996, initiative stated that the port was having a problem with spotters, who were mobile and in possession of high-tech communication devices.

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[8]Inspectors select a group of vehicles for additional inspection, using canines and other inspection tools.

The initiative was intended to impede, obstruct, and disrupt spotters in the port who were adversely affecting enforcement activities. The initiative presented several alternatives as short-term solutions to the spotter problem, including identifying suspected spotters by checking for criminal backgrounds through queries of the Treasury Enforcement and Communications System and by videotaping and photographing spotters.

The initiative also identified various measures to assess whether Laredo's solutions to the spotter problem increased the number of narcotic seizures and arrests of narcotic smugglers at the port. The initiative was ongoing at the time of our visit in January 1997; no results were available. Equipment requests were included in the initiative; however, they were mainly for Operation Hard Line and were not specifically identified as being for the spotter problem.

Nogales' Spotter Initiative

Port of Nogales officials submitted a spotter initiative on July 1, 1996. The initiative stated that the physical layout of the port had invited surveillance by smugglers, which subsequently allowed them to predict and immediately counter Customs' enforcement adjustments. The initiative proposed a number of options, including the installation of a remote camera surveillance system to observe inspectional areas, spotters, and vehicles. It also proposed visual barriers (privacy walls) to deter spotter surveillance and new doors on an inspectional area to shield the enforcement area from public view.

Nogales was also looking at another alternative to counter spotters, according to a Customs official. The National Guard was to provide an intelligence analyst/counter surveillance specialist, who would use the remote camera installations to photograph and catalogue suspects. Ultimately, this activity would allow Customs to identify spotters and use their presence at or near the port as an indicator of loads of narcotics approaching the port, according to the official.

The Nogales initiative also stated that Customs would attempt to identify the gross number of potential spotters and spotter locations at all Arizona ports of entry. This identification process would provide a baseline of potential spotters to measure the impact of the alternative strategies for identifying and reducing the numbers and effectiveness of spotters. At the time of our visit in December 1996, the port did not provide information on measures of effectiveness for these proposals, and not all of the requested equipment had been received.

PERFORMANCE OF THE TRUCK X-RAY SYSTEM

In March 1997, Customs had two truck X-ray systems in operation, one at the Otay Mesa Commercial Facility and one (newly installed) at the Calexico Commercial Facility.[9] The Otay Mesa truck X-ray system, which was developed by the Department of Defense and installed in September 1994, is both operational and being used as a prototype to test system upgrades. The truck X-ray system provides X-ray images of full-size tractor trailers, tanker trucks, automobiles, and other types of commercial conveyances.

The truck X-ray system was designed to detect contraband hidden in commercial conveyances.[10] Original specifications required the truck X ray to process between four to six vehicles per hour, including tractor-trailer trucks weighing up to 80,000 pounds. The truck X ray also had to meet government safety standards for X-ray emissions, produce X-ray images of a specified resolution, and be safe for food cargo. The truck X ray was not intended to replace manual inspection methods; it was designed to quickly and nonintrusively examine empty trucks and truck trailers.

Most trucks are randomly referred to the truck X ray during the cargo entry screening process; however, some trucks may have already been identified by inspectors as vehicles suspected of transporting contraband or illegal drugs. These trucks are referred to the X ray to determine[11] whether contraband or drugs are being smuggled. Nearby passenger ports of entry, such as San Ysidro, California, also refer suspect vehicles to the truck X ray for verification.

According to Customs' data, from its inception in September 1994 through July 1997, the Otay Mesa truck X-ray system detected a total of 23,728 pounds of drugs, including (see table I.2): 137 pounds of cocaine, 37 pounds of heroin, 23,498 pounds of marijuana, and 56 pounds of methamphetamine.[12]

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[9]Customs has plans to install six more truck X-ray systems by the end of 1999. Customs and the Department of Defense are reviewing and testing other nonintrusive truck imaging systems which, according to Customs officials, may better fit the needs of the cargo environment at other ports of entry. We did not review the performance of the newly installed Calexico truck X-ray system.

[10]The Otay Mesa truck X-ray system has detected contraband in vehicle doors and roofs, false walls, gas tanks, tires, and engine compartments.

[11]Vehicles are referred to the X-ray system to: (1) determine in a rapid and nonintrusive way whether drugs or contraband are concealed in the vehicle, (2) confirm a canine alert or an inspector's suspicion that there may be drugs in the vehicle, or (3) ensure that all drugs concealed in a vehicle have been detected (i.e., identify all concealment areas).

[12]The cocaine and heroin were detected in passenger vehicles that were referred from the port of San Ysidro; no cocaine or heroin was detected during this period in trucks passing through the port of Otay Mesa.

Table I.2: Truck X-ray System Seizures From September 1994 Through July 1997

Drugs seized	Cargo		Passenger		Total	
	Number	Pounds	Number	Pounds	Number	Pounds
Cocaine	0	0	3	137	3	137
Heroin	0	0	1	37	1	37
Marijuana	20	15,288	98	8,210	118	23,498
Methamphetamine	1	30	1	26	2	56
Total	**21**	**15,318**	**103**	**8,410**	**124**	**23,728**

Source: GAO analysis of Customs data.

According to the Otay Mesa X-ray Coordinator, approximately 50 percent of the drugs detected in trucks, and 90 percent detected in passenger vehicles, had already been identified in suspect vehicles before the referral to the truck X-ray system.

Customs records over an 1-year period, from June 1996 to May 1997, show that the X-ray system had examined a total of 23,980 vehicles, of which 64 percent were empty trucks, 35 percent were laden trucks, and 1 percent were cars or other vehicles that were referred from passenger ports of entry.[13]

The Otay Mesa truck X-ray system is scheduled to operate during the port's regular business hours, which are 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Monday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays (although on Sundays, the X-ray system is used only for examining imported produce). Customs' data for April 1997 show that the X ray processed an average of 6.4 vehicles per hour, and that system "downtime" was approximately 11 percent of total available time.[14] Customs officials defined downtime as time in which vehicles were not being X-rayed or were being processed for X-raying. System downtime includes the following:

- daily start-up and shut-down periods (30 minutes each);
- essential cleaning and preventative maintenance;
- mechanical breakdowns, equipment retrofit, and personnel training; and

[13]The truck X-ray system inspects more empty vehicles than laden vehicles because Otay Mesa restricts the hours laden vehicles can enter the port. Data shown are for the period immediately following the most recent major system upgrade in February 1996.

[14]Data for April 1997 represent the latest period during our review in which the X-ray system was fully operational (i.e., no system upgrades were in progress).

- the saving of X-ray images (i.e., drug detection) on tape.

Otay Mesa does not track system downtime by the above categories, only collectively. However, according to Customs officials, downtime caused by mechanical breakdowns decreased significantly after February 1996, when the truck conveyor unit, which pulls the vehicle through the X-ray system at a constant rate of speed, was replaced. Before the retrofit, Customs had identified breakdowns to the conveyor unit as the X-ray system's most common mechanical problem. According to the Otay Mesa X-ray Coordinator, the new conveyor unit (1) reduced downtime from an estimated 20 percent of total operating time to an average of 15 percent and (2) increased the average number of vehicles processed from 4.7 vehicles per hour to 6.2 vehicles per hour, which was a net increase in the processing rate of 32 percent. In January 1996, before the retrofit, the X-ray system processed 1,760 vehicles; Customs' data for June 1997, the most recent data available, show the system processed 2,120 vehicles during that month.

As of February 1997, expenditures for the truck X-ray system at Otay Mesa totaled approximately $3.3 million.[15] The original cost of the X-ray system--$2.8 million--was paid by the Department of Defense. Customs paid $515,738 for system upgrades, including the new conveyor unit, and approximately $30,000 for personnel-related costs, such as training and travel, on the Otay Mesa X-ray system. Customs also estimated that it will cost an average of $3.3 million for each of the additional truck X-ray systems scheduled for deployment.[16] The Department of Defense provided $6 million in fiscal year 1997 toward the purchase of two additional systems. Customs is to pay the balance for these systems as well as the full cost of any additional systems.

According to Customs officials, the truck X-ray system has met original system specifications and is now performing as expected. According to these officials, since the replacement of the original conveyor unit, the X-ray system routinely exceeds the required six vehicle per hour processing rate and is able to consistently and safely process large trucks.

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[15]This total includes the cost of the trailer used to house X-ray monitors and taping equipment, the cost of site preparation (e.g., digging an X-ray pit), and the upgrade of the system's conveyor unit, as well as the X-ray machine itself.

[16]This estimate may vary from port to port depending on geographic considerations. For example, because the Calexico port is located in a flood plain, its X-ray system had to be built on pilings to ensure structural integrity.

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