

# Overrun at the Border

*Ranchers live with daily invasions of migrants and drug mules.*

*By Leo W. Banks*

**R**ancher John Ladd marks October 2020, a month before the presidential election, as the time border security started going to hell on his southern Arizona ranch. That was when Democrat Joe Biden said, if elected, he would amnesty 11 million illegal aliens in his first 100 days. That promise produced an uptick in illegal crossings. But the flow really picked up after Jan. 20, 2021, President Biden's first day in office, when he suspended all border wall construction.

"After that, I began getting eight or nine groups a day and now we're drowning in them," says Ladd, whose ranch covers 10 and a half miles of border in Cochise County, Ariz. "They catch 50 a day on my ranch and 50 more are getting away."

During Trump's years, Border Patrol was arresting 20 a month at Ladd's. What happened? Elections matter. Presidential rhetoric matters. Security matters. Biden's policies

**In a few short months, Biden has opened the southern border. Mission accomplished. But what happened to his oath to protect the country?**

He also ended Trump's Remain-In-Mexico policy, which required asylum seekers to wait south of the border. Now, under Biden, as under Obama, asylum seekers who have been coached well enough to pass their initial interviews are shipped, at taxpayer expense, around the country to await word on their claims. Once settled, their chances of being removed are about zero. These changes swamped the border with crossers in Biden's

burn estimates that number at 90 percent.

"But they still have to be processed," he says. "The agents I talked to were so busy they only intercepted one group in their shift. Another 10 groups got away that they know of."

Cochise County Sheriff Mark Dannels says that from Oct. 1, 2020, through April 2021 in Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, which covers 262 miles of border with Mexico, the agency recorded 60,000 "gotaways."

"Sixty thousand people and we have no idea who they are," he says. "That should be a national security issue for everybody."

Dannels' department gets a good view of the problem through its Southeastern Arizona Border Region Enforcement (Sabre) team, a network of 600 to 700 live-stream cameras along smuggling trails in Cochise, Santa Cruz, Pima and Yuma counties. In spring of last year, these cameras counted 300

*LEFT: Illegal crossers wearing gloves and knee pads crawl through the brush, trying to hide from Border Patrol radar. "They'll crawl for miles," says Sheriff Mark Dannels. The Sabre team's camera system is so effective the smugglers have started stealing them.*

*BELOW: Rancher Jim Chilton stands behind a pile of carpet booties found on his land. Workers on cartel payrolls make them by the thousands on the south side of the border.*



COURTESY OF COCHISE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

have encouraged a rush to the border and made it easier for those seeking entry to get in, regardless of how it impacts American citizens in their path.

In addition to stopping the wall, the new president has drastically restricted deportations, which encourages more migrants to cross illegally. Why not? If they make it across, they know they probably won't be sent back. Biden also altered Trump's Title 42 emergency order, created out of the pandemic, that sent everyone arriving at the border, including kids and asylum seekers, back to Mexico. Biden allowed an exception for minors that attracted thousands of kids and families.

first months in office.

Ron Colburn, Border Patrol's retired national deputy chief, says he was talking to field agents at one Arizona station. On a recent day 90 percent of the agents who should've been out looking for illegal crossers and drugs were held back to process asylum claims.

Asylum is an important part of the American creed, providing sanctuary to those with a credible fear of persecution due to race, religion, membership in a particular social group, nationality, or political opinions. But economic migrants and those who fear violence in their home countries do not qualify, and Col-



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ABOVE: Because of wider legalization in the United States, DEA says marijuana seizures at the Southwest border have decreased 83 percent since 2013. But mules still backpack 50-pound bundles over rugged terrain. After Arizona approved recreational use in November, Cochise County's Sabre team saw an increase in marijuana smuggling. "We caught some of them and they told us that weed here is too expensive," says Sabre supervisor Sgt. Tim Williams. BELOW: This section of Trump's 30-foot wall stands along the border road east of Sasabe. There is wall on 30 of the 44 miles from Nogales to Sasabe.

to 400 illegal entries a month. In April 2021 alone, they had 3,800 illegal entries.

Welcome to America and thank Joe Biden on the way in. His orders also stopped installation of new lighting, sensors, and any further improvements on border roads. Manpower shortages forced Border Patrol to move 300 agents from its Willcox station in northern Cochise County to other areas, and the agency closed three highway checkpoints in the county for the first five months of the year.

If Dannels' deputies stopped illegals near Willcox and couldn't get agents to drive from stations farther away to pick them up, they had to let them go.

"I don't blame Border Patrol," says Dannels. "When Biden declared the Southwest border a nonemergency, it sent a message. We hear all the time from the people coming across that the border is open, and now is the time to come."

Small-town residents are finding more and more illegals in their communities. In late April in Benson, between Tucson and Tombstone, athletes returning from a high school sporting event found illegal aliens hiding in the parking lot. Three ran and got away. Benson police detained another three who were released when Border Patrol wouldn't come pick them up.

Angry citizens confronted the City Council at a public meeting. Vice Mayor Larry Dempster, along with the mayor and city manager, had a conference call with agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, telling them there was no money or facilities in town to handle illegals, it was upsetting citizens and please stop.

"They said they were sympathetic, but they would drop them wherever they want-

ed," says Dempster. When he suggested Benson police drive them to Tucson, where the mayor has welcomed them, "We were told not to arrest them for being in the country illegally and not to put them in patrol cars against their will."

Eighty miles west of Cochise County on Tom Kay's border ranch outside Arivaca, the story is the same: "We're seeing more traffic crossing around here than we've had in a



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*John Ladd shows a section of repaired fence that smugglers had cut. "Border Patrol used to have a 10-pound ball and chain on them and now it's 50 pounds with their hands tied behind their backs," he says. "But they're still trying to catch everyone they can regardless of the attitude in Washington. I'm proud of them." RIGHT: Sheriff Mark Dannels. Arizona National Guard troops are in Cochise County helping the sheriff and his deputies. "The oath that I take, the governor takes, and the president takes, all say the same thing, to protect America and Americans," he says. "It's frustrating when that's not happening."*

long, long, long time."

The rapid deterioration in conditions has nerves jangled. Dannels' department received a threat from the cartel vowing to send assassins across to kill a random deputy. Ranchers know they share their land with drug runners and illegal crossers and say they wouldn't live anywhere else. But it's a constant worry.

Jim Chilton, Kay's neighbor in Arivaca, is reminded of that every morning when he steps outside. "We never feel safe," he says. "We carry guns in our trucks, on our horses, in our house, and I keep one next to my bed. My cowboys carry, too."

A saving grace, as Chilton sees it, is that the smugglers use mountaintop scouts to route their mules around his barns and house, providing a measure of safety. He says, "They watch everything we do and everything Border Patrol does, and they have the best equipment."

When a scout hurriedly abandoned his perch on Chilton's ranch, he left behind expensive binoculars and a phone that Chilton took to an expert to have analyzed. It cost \$2,700, had satellite encryption and a radio function.

Sometimes, though, the bad guys are hard to avoid. Late last year, one of Chilton's cowboys was on the border checking a gate when he was surprised by smugglers. He was beaten and robbed of \$150 and his phone. "Now our cowboys won't go to that pasture near the

border," Chilton says. "So we opened our gates to the north and on their own the cattle went to an ungrazed pasture there."

Ladd has trouble keeping his cows where he wants them. "I get them close to the corrals and then there's traffic at night and they're gone," he says. "I have to round them up again."

Trump's new 30-foot wall has helped some, but gaps abound. On the Kay and Chilton ranches, openings were left to give crews from the International Boundary and

**"We hear all the time from the people coming across that the border is open, and now is the time to come."**

Water Commission access to border monuments, a treaty obligation. But with Biden's stop-work order, no gates have been put in and only barbed wire fills the openings.

At Ladd's ranch, gates have been installed at his 52 low-water crossings. Arizona's summer monsoons create flash floods that funnel through these areas with such force they could wash the wall away, no matter how

solidly built. The idea is to open gates during the rainy season to let the water run.

But earlier this year, Ladd says smugglers cut off a couple of locks and used the serial numbers to get keys off eBay. Border Patrol replaced the locks and took other steps to stop that from happening.

Crossers also cut holes in the wall, which consists of cement-filled bollards separated by four inches of open space. Using acetylene torches, they remove a 14-inch section at the bottom and crawl through the opening. From January through April, Ladd says 200 holes were cut in the 40 miles between the San Pedro River and the Douglas Border Patrol station. Repairs are a constant. The battle never ends.

Ladd's land is guarded by two and a half miles of 18-foot fence and eight miles of 30-foot fence, the latter built after April 2020. "It's an ugly son of a gun, but it sure helps."

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Ordinary working Americans don't want open borders, but Washington does, and the argument often revolves around humanitarian concerns, some legitimate. Dannels notes that in 2020, a slow year because of COVID, the Tucson Sector saw 181 John and Jane Does die in Arizona's deserts and mountains. He says, "I'm not looking forward to seeing the numbers at the end of this year."

However, there's nothing humanitarian about policies that encourage kids and fami-





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lies to undertake dangerous crossings that make the worst people in our hemisphere richer. How? The drug gangs also smuggle people. No plaza boss allows migrants to walk north on one of the trails he owns without getting paid.

Mexican nationals pay about \$7,000 each, of which \$1,000 goes to the cartel as a pass-through fee. OTMs—other than Mexicans—pay \$12,000, about \$2,000 of which goes to the cartel. But that money is often owed rather than paid. When individuals get to their destinations, the traffickers force them to pay off their debts as laborers for gangs, by sex work and through the drug business.

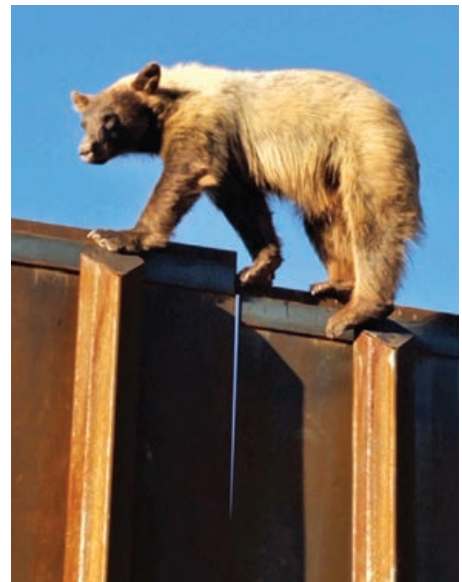
The latter is booming, and the Southwest border is the main entry point. About 90 percent of the methamphetamine and heroin on America's streets comes across the Mexican border. The synthetic opioid fentanyl has been surging in recent years, and its impact is devastating: 81,000 overdose deaths in the United States in the 12 months ending May 2020—the highest number ever recorded, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

That's 222 Americans dying every

*A trail cam near Arivaca picked up these illegals outfitted in camouflage and carpet booties to disguise their tracks. Illegal crossings between the ports largely consist of young men, who are still subject to deportation. Border Patrol in Nogales reports that apprehensions in its area, which covers 32 miles of border, are up 160 percent from last year. Fentanyl seizures are up 63 percent. RIGHT: A bear gets a good look at Ladd's ranch from atop an 18-foot border wall. In April a crosser died after falling from a 30-foot section of wall on Ladd's ranch. BELOW: A portion of the wall at Ladd's ranch. Of Trump's 30-foot wall, Sgt. Tim Williams, supervisor of the county's Sabre team, says: "They can definitely get over it, but you need some physical barrier that shows crossing into the country is an illegal act. And it gives us a chance to catch them when they try to run back." Notice the cuts in the razor wire made by reaching through from the south side. Cochise County has 83 miles of border with Mexico.*

day...and fentanyl is a key driver.

Two important factors to note: The vast majority of hard drugs enter through the ports of entry; and multiple administrations have fought this battle with limited success. But in the early months of his presidency, Biden has added an insidious twist. By tying



COURTESY OF JOHN LADD

up border officials with babysitting and asylum claims, he has made the cartels' job much easier.

Will the administration change course and make American citizens its first concern? Optimism is hard to find here.

"As long as border security isn't a priority," Dannels says, "I don't see a good future for public safety in my county."

John Ladd says his daily life has gone back to the bad old days when he'd go into his barn or feed house every morning looking over his shoulder in case anyone was there.

"I was locking doors and trucks and worried about my wife, my kids, my grandkids, my mom and dad," he says. "All that stopped during Trump's four years and now it's the same old crap again. Biden has set us back 30 years on immigration. Why do we have to live like this?" ■

*Leo Banks is an award-winning reporter who has covered the Arizona-Mexico border for years. He lives in Tucson.*



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