

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal and tribal lands on the U.S. borders with Canada and Mexico are vulnerable to illegal cross-border activity. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—through its U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s Office of Border Patrol (Border Patrol)—is responsible for securing these lands, while the Departments of the Interior (DOI) and Agriculture (USDA) manage natural resources and protect the public. GAO was asked to examine the extent that (1) border security threats have changed on federal lands; (2) federal agencies operating on these lands have shared threat information and communications; and (3) federal agencies have coordinated budgets, resources, and strategies. GAO reviewed interagency agreements and threat assessments; analyzed enforcement data from 2007 through 2009; and interviewed officials at headquarters and two Border Patrol sectors selected due to high volume of illegal cross-border activity (Tucson) and limited ability to detect this activity (Spokane). GAO’s observations cannot be generalized to all sectors but provide insights. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in October 2010. Information that DHS deemed sensitive has been redacted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOI and USDA determine if more guidance is needed for federal land closures, and that DHS, DOI, and USDA further implement interagency agreements. DHS, DOI, and USDA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-11-177](#) or key components. For more information, contact Richard Stana at (202) 512-8777 or stanar@gao.gov.

BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Better Ensure a Coordinated Federal Response to Illegal Activity on Federal Lands

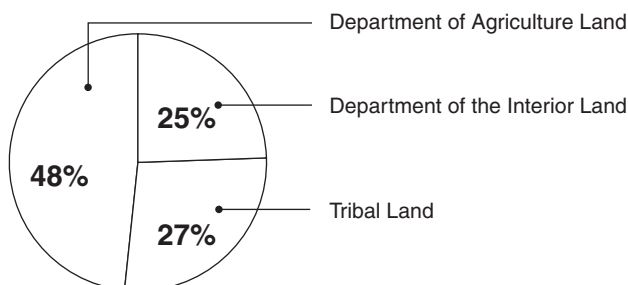
What GAO Found

Illegal cross-border activity remains a significant threat to federal lands. On the southwest border, the Tucson sector is the primary entry point for marijuana smugglers and illegal aliens, and over the last 3 years apprehensions on federal lands have not kept pace with Border Patrol estimates of the number of illegal entries, indicating that the threat to federal lands may be increasing. On the northern border, the Spokane sector is a primary entry point for air smugglers of high-potency marijuana, but technical challenges preclude fully assessing threats to these borderlands. In the Tucson sector, federal land managers said they would like additional guidance to determine when illegal cross-border activity poses a sufficient public safety risk for them to restrict or close access to federal lands. DOI and USDA efforts to determine whether additional guidance is needed—consistent with internal control standards for the federal government and in line with DHS contingency plans for southwest border violence—could help federal land managers more easily balance public safety and access to federal borderlands.

Information sharing and communication among DHS, DOI, and USDA have increased in recent years, but critical gaps remain in implementing interagency agreements. Agencies established forums and liaisons to exchange information; however, in the Tucson sector, agencies did not coordinate to ensure that federal land law enforcement officials maintained access to threat information and compatible secure radio communications for daily operations. Coordination in these areas could better ensure officer safety and an efficient law enforcement response to illegal activity.

There has been little interagency coordination to share intelligence assessments of border security threats to federal lands and develop budget requests, strategies, and joint operations to address these threats. Interagency efforts to implement provisions of existing agreements in these areas could better leverage law enforcement partner resources and knowledge for more effective border security operations on federal lands.

Percentage of Border Patrol—Estimated Illegal Entries on Federal Lands in the Tucson Sector, Fiscal Year 2009



Source: GAO analysis of Border Patrol data.