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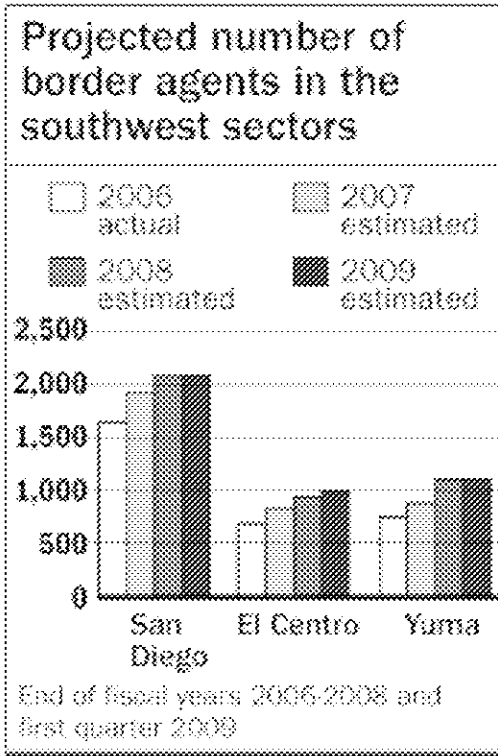
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NORTH COUNTY TIMES

THE CALIFORNIAN

Last modified Friday, April 11, 2008 8:53 PM PDT



SOURCE: GAO analysis of Border Patrol data NCT

Border Patrol on track in hiring 6,000 new agents
 By EDWARD SIFUENTES - Staff Writer

U.S. Border Patrol officials say they are on track to beef up their ranks from nearly 16,000 today to 18,319 agents by the end of the year.

But some critics say the agency is cutting too many corners to meet the goal set by President Bush two years ago.

Facing pressure to do more to curb illegal immigration, Bush announced in May 2006 that the federal government would hire 6,000 more Border Patrol agents. He also sent 6,000 National Guard troops to the border, an assignment scheduled to end in July.

As of March 29, about 2,000 agents were deployed along the U.S. border with Mexico in San Diego County. The San Diego sector has gained about 350 agents since 2006.

Chris Bauder, president of the Border Patrol union that represents San Diego-area agents, said the rush to hire the agents is going to create problems.

An agent with 12 years experience, Bauder said the agency is lowering hiring standards and reducing training.

"They are focusing on quantity, not quality," Bauder said Friday.

Tara Dunlop, a spokeswoman for the agency in Washington, said the Border Patrol has not compromised its standards.

"All of our hiring and training practices are implemented to ensure that all Border Patrol agents have the highest level of integrity," Dunlop wrote in an e-mail. "We see no degradation in the quality of candidates who have passed our employment tests, background investigations and training programs."

In order to attract more recruits, the agency has increased its advertising efforts, such as sponsoring a race car, posting hundreds of billboards and airing TV ads. The agency also raised the age limit for recruits from 37 to 40.

But that's not all it's done, according to Bauder. He said training time at the academy has been cut from 19 weeks to 11 weeks, meaning trainees have less time to learn vital skills such as the proper handling of weapons.

The agency also has reduced training for bilingual trainees. All recruits get 55 days of basic training, and those who do not speak Spanish receive additional language instruction, according to the Border Patrol.

"This logical, and more efficient, restructure of the basic academy allows all students to focus on critical legal and operational academic requirements during the initial 55 days of training.

"This includes law, operations, driving, firearms and physical training techniques, which remain the same," Dunlop wrote.

Bauder said the agency also is recruiting people who score 70 percent on the entrance exam, which is the minimum score. The exam tests basic language, personality and reasoning skills. Traditionally, only applicants scoring in the 85 percent range were considered for an interview, Bauder said.

Dunlop disputed that, saying the agency's minimum score on the exam has always been 70 percent.

Bauder and other union officials have said they worry that the pressure to meet the hiring goal may lead the agency to admit recruits with integrity problems.

Nearly 5,000 agents were added in a five-year period that began in 1996. That expansion was criticized for poor screening that let in some agents who were later accused of wrongdoing.

Bauder said that more ethical problems could emerge from the current expansion because the numbers are higher and the deadline is tighter.

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