

Competing groups plan patrols along border

Civilians share goals, but disagree on tactics

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Civilian border watchers are returning to San Diego County, and while the two groups will be conducting their patrols along the same stretch of California's border with Mexico, they don't plan on working together.

A group calling itself the California Minutemen plans on kicking off a week of patrols with a picnic at the Campo Veterans of Foreign Wars post tomorrow, then return the second week of October; another group called Friends of the Border Patrol will start civilian patrols between Border Field State Park and Calexico Sept. 16, Mexican Independence Day.

The competing groups are at odds, with each criticizing the way the other operates. But they say they have a common goal: to reduce illegal immigration and drug traffic and to support an overworked Border Patrol, although some federal agents say their help is unwelcome.

Jim Chase, a former postal worker from Oceanside who staged a three-week border watch in Campo starting in July, said his California Minuteman volunteers will be based in the Campo area as they patrol between Jacumba and Tecate.

Andy Ramirez, a Chino resident and organizer of the Friends of the Border Patrol, hopes to indefinitely station 100 volunteers from Border Field to Calexico. Ramirez initially planned to patrol the border in August, but postponed the watch because of the heat.

As the rival California groups prepare, so are law enforcement, protesters, and volunteer legal observers. And the residents and leaders of some of the areas where they plan to patrol are divided over the volunteers and whether they do any good.

"It would be helpful as long as they're not carrying arms and stuff like that," said Leon Herzog, 61, the owner of the Barrett Cafe in Barrett Junction, about 15 miles from Campo. "As long as it is a set of eyes" (it's OK).

Both border-watch organizers say they have support from many border-area residents, including some who are letting them use their property as a base. Ramirez said he plans to set up exclusively on private property.

But not all border-area residents are pleased by the civilian patrols. Some residents in the Campo area are fed up, especially after Chase's event drew crowds of protesters, dozens of reporters and camera crews, and sheriff's deputies to keep the peace. About 25 deputies at a time were deployed in the tiny unincorporated town, most of them on overtime, to monitor the volunteers and protesters. Three undocumented immigrants were apprehended thanks to the border watchers' efforts, according to the Border Patrol.

"The money we spend on baby-sitting these two groups could be better spent on hiring deputies and Border Patrol and CHP people," said Campo resident Roger Challberg, 75. "It is just a pain in the neck as far as I am concerned. We don't need it."



In Calexico, people from throughout Southern California are expected to show up next weekend to protest the border watchers, whom they accuse of racism, a charge both Chase and Ramirez deny.

Regardless, Calexico city leaders unanimously passed a resolution this week condemning the presence of civilian patrol groups.

"They are not needed here," said Alex Perrone, the mayor of Calexico. "If they come, I am going to tell these Minutemen and Friends of the Border Patrol, 'Go there to New Orleans. Show you're patriotic and help your fellow man.' "

"We just want to let the government improve the quality of life for border residents and to let the Border Patrol do its job," Ramirez said.

Both he and Chase cite the recent deployment of some Border Patrol agents to the Gulf Coast to help in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as reason enough for their presence.

But some federal agents say the border watchers do more harm than good.

"They are just pushing traffic to other areas of the border," said Chris Bauder, president of Local 1613 of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents San Diego-area agents. "Everybody is talking about controlling the border, but you can't control the border until you control the source of the problem, and the source is the employment issue."

Bauder said he and other Border Patrol union leaders spoke with Ramirez about his volunteers lobbying for stronger sanctions against employers who hire undocumented workers, instead of patrolling the border, but Ramirez was uninterested.

Bauder said he is baffled by the rivalry. In addition, neither Chase nor Ramirez plans to work with a third organization, the Arizona-based Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, which plans patrols along the southern and northern borders in October.

Ramirez and Chase cite organizational and other differences: Ramirez criticizes Chase for encouraging the use of firearms and patrolling close to the border fence, a potentially dangerous area; Chase criticizes Ramirez, who has no other employment, for taking monetary donations. Ramirez, who said he's trying to obtain nonprofit status, said he takes a small stipend, but uses the rest for equipment.

Ramirez said he plans to allow only volunteers who are active or retired law enforcement and have gun permits to carry firearms. His group also plans to stay on private property at least 1,000 yards from the border. Chase, who is unsure how many volunteers he will have, said he plans to patrol along the fence in an area he said is used by drug traffickers.

Members of Chase's group reported to Sheriff's deputies in July that they had heard shots fired while they were near the border fence.

Ramirez hopes not only to minimize danger by staying on private property but to steer clear of protesters, who are expected to show up in force in Calexico. But some attorneys say there could be legal repercussions against property owners who host border watchers if anything goes wrong or someone is hurt.

"It could get violent down there," Chase said "I am expecting some shots to be fired at us."

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