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Interior Dept. apprehends 4,000 immigrants at US border in 6 months

BY MIRANDA GREEN - 11/09/18 12:21 PM EST

Interior Department law enforcement officers in the past six months apprehended 4,010 immigrants illegally entering the country and turned them over to U.S. Border Patrol, according to government data released Friday.

In addition to border apprehensions, agency officers seized 2,356 pounds of drugs, as well as vehicles and firearms, according to the Interior Department.

The officers, whose jobs typically focus on patrolling federal parks in Washington, D.C., San Francisco and New York City, were sent to the U.S.-Mexico border at the behest of Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to aid President Trump's call for a border surge.

The agency said the decision to place officers at "identified Interior lands" near the border was made in order to patrol U.S. parks and public land and provide assistance with arrests to Border Patrol. The reassignment of agency law enforcement increased arrests by almost 4,000 percent compared to the last six months of the Obama administration, according to Interior.

"President Trump made a promise to the American people that his administration will do everything we can to secure the southern border and protect our people, and that is exactly what Interior's law enforcement professionals are doing," Zinke said in a statement Friday.

"Under the previous administration, Interior's borderlands were basically an open door for illegal activity; and, what few law enforcement officers were down there were left unprotected and without the resources and backup needed to keep communities and themselves safe," he added.

Interior has acknowledged that this is the first time the force has been used in this capacity, and critics say it's stretching the scope of the officers' job descriptions — especially the US Park Police (USPP).

"This is not within the purview of Interior," said Rep. Raúl Grijalva (Ariz.), the ranking Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee, told The Hill in May. "It's a ridiculous idea but the motivation is political, pure and simple, it has nothing to do with safety or enforcement. And it certainly doesn't enhance the mission of the Park Service."

Grijalva will likely take over as chairman of the committee, which oversees the Interior Department.

Critics have also pointed out the small number of arrests compared to the Border Patrol's annual arrests for illegal border crossings.

"I will note that 4,000 apprehensions are a teeny tiny part of the 500,000+ total border apprehensions that CBP reports. Really a drop in the bucket," said Aaron Weiss, media director at the Center for Western Priorities.

Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the relocation of Interior officers happened during the peak summer season at national parks, where employees are already struggling with "crippling" staff shortages due to a hiring freeze.

"This deployment has been nothing but a PR stunt and a huge waste of resources. Park rangers simply did the job that Border Patrol is already doing. It took rangers away from their real jobs, which is protecting natural resources and keeping the public safe in national parks," Jordahl told The Hill in a statement.

Interior would not provide answers to The Hill regarding the total number of law enforcement sent to the border, or their specific locations, citing security concerns.

The Hill first reported on the assignments of USPP and National Park Service (NPS) officers to the border in May. At the time, the agency planned to send 22 officers in rotating groups and spend "approximately 21 days" at two national park and monument sites located on the U.S.–Mexico border: Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona and Amistad National Recreation Area in Texas.

Both areas already had NPS law enforcement officers who work in conjunction with Border Patrol agents.

Interior manages 40 percent of the land along the southern border. There are also a number of Tribal Reservations and Native American Communities located along or near the border. The department oversees the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Zinke at the time promised the numbers would grow in the summer to adjust to an influx of crossings.

Additional official guidance obtained by The Hill that was sent to park superintendents last spring said the border surge was requested by the Department of Homeland Security.

"Specifically, the National Park Service (NPS) has been directed to provide increases in law enforcement staffing levels, for a period of ninety days," read a May 9 email sent by NPS Deputy Director Paul Daniel Smith. "Because this is a Servicewide initiative, it is expected that all Regions and the United States Park Police will provide staffing to ensure that this effort is able to efficiently and effectively meet the operational objectives while allowing all Regions to appropriately sustain Servicewide operations."