

THE NATION; Ferry security checks roil islanders; The Border Patrol in Washington state says intelligence indicates a problem. Locals decry a 'culture of fear.' Los Angeles Times June 30, 2008 Monday

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Los Angeles Times

June 30, 2008 Monday
Home Edition

SECTION: MAIN NEWS; National Desk; Part A; Pg. 7

LENGTH: 842 words

HEADLINE: THE NATION;
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The Border Patrol in Washington state says intelligence indicates a problem. Locals decry a 'culture of fear.'

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DATELINE: ANACORTES, WASH.

BODY:

Looking to snag illegal immigrants, drug runners and terrorists, the U.S. Border Patrol is staging surprise checks of travelers on domestic ferry runs in the San Juan Islands. What they are catching is heat from ticked-off locals.

Border Patrol agents began conducting random checks and undercover surveillance at the Washington state ferry terminal in Anacortes this year. The agents intercept disembarking passengers, inquire about citizenship, request IDs, and run vehicle and criminal background checks. A plainclothes officer patrols the small terminal.

The beefed-up security has sparked scores of complaints from island residents, but authorities stand by the spot checks on domestic ferries -- which they say could expand to include a second route.

The measures are "not a stretch, not speculative," said Joseph Giuliano, deputy chief patrol agent for the Border Patrol's Blaine, Wash., sector. "Our intel tells us we have a limited problem" a few miles from Canada's Vancouver Island.

"We don't like to go out on limbs with our limited resources," he said.

About 12 times a month since February, armed border agents in fatigues have put up checkpoints -- a jarring presence for many in this vacation destination known for its serene landscape.

Agents have arrested 50 people -- 49 of them Latinos, mostly from Mexico -- on suspicion of immigration violations and have turned them over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Ferry ID checks also netted four U.S. citizens on charges of personal use of marijuana.

The Border Patrol wants to secure a porous border and send a message, not to chalk up mass arrests, Giuliano said.

Through history, the archipelago's 170 islands, web of channels and isolated coves have provided cover to criminals -- opium traffickers, moonshine peddlers and pot sellers.

In December 1999, Ahmed Ressay -- the so-called millennium bomber -- was arrested in nearby Port Angeles, Wash. A customs agent stopped Ressay for questioning as he was leaving a ferry from Canada. Ressay had explosives in the trunk of his rental car; he was later convicted of plotting to blow up Los Angeles International Airport during the millennium celebration.

But that was an international ferry.

Many islanders have a different attitude toward the domestic ferry runs. At packed local government meetings, some critics of the recent spot checks tossed around terms like "police state" and "racial profiling."

Most people "just don't like it," said Howard Rosenfeld, San Juan County council chairman. "It promotes a culture of fear."

He worries that tourists, especially international ones, will end up taking their business elsewhere.

"Anyone who acknowledges they are not an American gets taken aside," he said. "That creates a delay, and that's a disincentive for tourists to come and visit here."

About 15,500 people live in the island county. The population swells from spring through autumn when 600,000 tourists visit.

Most island adventures begin and end at Anacortes Ferry Terminal, a well-worn single-story structure at the tip of Fidalgo Island, a bridge across from the mainland.

It is the gateway to first-class sailing, power-boating, and whale-watching. Subarus and SUVs laden with kayaks, mountain bikes, and camping and beach gear queue up for the

ferry. Long before border checks, traffic bottlenecked at the terminal.

Waiting at the terminal on a recent overcast day, Stacy Swanson, 28, lamented the elevated security. For three generations, her family has cherished the beautiful and relaxing islands.

"It's such a serene, calm place," she said. "You come here to get away from all your problems, away from the big city and all the bad things you're confronted with."

The checkpoints rattle islanders' sensibilities, another longtime local said.

"We ought to be able to travel within our country without being subject to being searched," said Jack Sprout, a retired orchardist.

By all accounts, the checks have hit the islands' small population of illegal immigrants hardest. Authorities arrested several longtime agricultural and construction workers for immigration violations.

When agents detained one family, the local Roman Catholic church raised \$30,000 for bail. Some Latinos fear leaving the islands because of the checkpoints. Some have not traveled for months.

Not everyone opposes the checks. At the Anacortes visitor center, retired airline pilot Lee Dawes answers questions and hands out brochures.

Ferry ID checks are like airport security: necessary, he said. "I'm glad they do it."

For its part, the Border Patrol views the country's roughly four dozen checkpoints inside the United States as last lines of defense.

About 70 miles north of the Mexican border, at the checkpoint along Interstate 5 at Camp Pendleton, traffic slows to a crawl.

Like it or not, travelers are used to it.

San Juan County Councilman Kevin Ranker and other local officials wrote to the state's congressional delegation asking for alternatives to the ferry checkpoints.

"It isn't something we want to get used to," Ranker said.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: SAN JUAN ISLANDS: Residents worry about checkpoints' effect on tourism. And after 50 immigration-related arrests, some local Latinos fear traveling.

PHOTOGRAPHER:Elaine Thompson Associated Press

LOAD-DATE: June 30, 2008 