

U.S. Border Patrol working on issue of illegal border crossings

**STORY AND PHOTO
BY TERRY DUFFY**

Editor-in-Chief

Responding to concerns over a spike in illegal border activity on the lower Niagara River, agents from U.S. Customs and Border Protection provided some answers to residents in a well-attended information session last Thursday at Porter Town Hall.

Bradley Waikel, commander of the Niagara Falls Station for the U.S. Border Patrol Buffalo Sector, opened by discussing the many roles of border agents who comprise the Buffalo Sector. He said the operation covers some 25,464 miles in the eastern Great Lakes, and Buffalo is one of 20 such nationwide in the U.S.

Addressing the Issue

"Every agency is working with us on this problem," Waikel said. "We've had CBP, U.S. Coast Guard; office of Field Operations; Lewiston PD, Youngstown PD, Niagara County Sheriffs, State Police, NY Parks Police. There is not a single agency that has not come with us to help."

So, what are Border Patrol agents contending with right now?

"We're seeing with people crossing in rafts," Waikel said.

This type of activity is nothing new. Waikel said it has been a part of life in the lower river for a century, dating to 1924 when agents monitored bootlegging during prohibition. "It has never completely gone away."

"What we're seeing now has always been here. I've been here for four years; we have always had people crossing the river. We've always had drugs crossing the river. What has changed between



Bradley Waikel, commander of the Niagara Falls Station for the U.S. Border Patrol Buffalo Sector.

now and then is the frequency."

He said the illegal crossings in the lower river have increased 300% to 400% in just months.

"(In the past), we might see a raft maybe four, five times per year. Since November, we've had over 20 incidents," Waikel said. "That's a significant increase for us. Going from three or four per year to more than 20 since November."

As far as location and frequency, it's "the whole lower river," Waikel said. "There is not a place

on the lower river where we haven't seen a raft landing."

Waikel said main target areas have been around Lewiston Landing, around Joseph Davis State Park, "But where we've seen the majority of them have been around Youngstown Estates, Collingwood Estates and in Youngstown, where we've seen most of these rafts landing on shore."

Of the more than 20 such events, "the majority of them have been inflatable rafts," Waikel said. "We have seen some regular boats, too. Most of them have been small dinghies, fiberglass or aluminum boats. ... We had an 18-foot aluminum boat with a motor come across (Feb. 8) about 4 a.m. "They're coming across. Almost always at night, because criminals don't like to be caught. We have seen everything from a single person crossing in a tiny little raft rowing across, to four to five boats launched at the same time with one, two people coming across, to inflatable boats with four people in them, to an aluminum boat with five people in it."

"Each event, with one to five people coming across, always at night. Every single time of these

events, when we encounter people, they are soaking wet. We're talking November (to) February. The group that crossed earlier this morning, it was 25 degrees, water temp hovering around 35 degrees.

"That is my greater fear with these: It keeps happening, unfortunately someone is going to be lost in the water. This is a safety thing here. They're not from here, they don't know the dangers. They cross the river, but they don't stay here. Every single person is trying to go somewhere else."

Of those crossing, he added, "They want to avoid an encounter with you, with anyone. They'll either have someone to pick them up or they're on their own. They'll hide in different areas, a hedge-row, an unlocked shed, a summer residence, an unlocked house. Their intention is to get away."

"My advice is to lock your doors; if you're not doing it now, you should."

How Are They Entering?

Waikel explained, "Canada has this thing called electronic travel authorizations (ETAs). It's an app. You pay \$7 for it. You can cross into Canada by plane without a visa. Mexico is one of the countries that can do it now, and there's about 50-60 other that allowed to do it."

"That means there's a minimal amount of vetting, people from Mexico can fly directly into Canada. One of the biggest is in Toronto; it's only 30 miles across the lake. My station happens to be the closest border patrol station to Toronto. That hub is being fueled by these ETAs, and that's where these people are coming from."

"They connected with a network of smugglers. What we're seeing up here is a spiderweb of bad people that are all connected somehow. It's one guy knows an immigrant population; another guy knows how to get them down towards Niagara Falls, another guy (has vehicle access). All this network comes together, and that's what starts moving people."

"The smugglers, all that they care about is the bottom line. To them it's a business; the people who are getting smuggled (they) don't see them as people. To a smuggler, they're only a commodity. It's why we're seeing crossing the river when it's only 15, 20 degrees outside."

What Should Residents Do in An Encounter?

"If you see something, say

something," Waikel said. "If you see something abnormal, give us a call. Don't try to transport them; you could be cited for aiding and abetting."

"When we see them as law enforcement, we're going to catch them. We want those smugglers; they're the ones that are driving this. They're the ones that are putting people into real danger. We're working with Homeland Security investigations, with Canadian law enforcement, and we're working with all our local and state partners to make that happen. Our job is to build these cases up, to get those folks in jail. That's how you ultimately stop it."

Waikel said he expects illegal crossings to continue until, "collectively, we're successful in making it (that it's) no longer an attractive place (here) and they're not making money. Smugglers only care about the bottom line; they're going to move people wherever they think they can, as long as they're making money."

"We will keep what we're doing as law enforcement, attacking this and keep catching these smugglers until it becomes unpopular to continue doing it."

Waikel closed by urging residents who may encounter any such activity to contact the Border Patrol at 1-800-331-0353, or call 911 to reach area law enforcement.

"If you see something, say something," he stressed.

Waikel said agents along the northern border have caught illegals from 79 different countries. "The Buffalo Sector alone has caught 21. In rafts, mostly from Mexico, from India, Pakistan, Colombia, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, pretty much every Central American country."

"Most of the people we are catching are what we call economic migrants. They are people coming here looking for work. They're not looking to break into someone's house; they're looking for work, to move on, get work."

However, "There's also sex offenders, gang members, illegals who assault," Waikel said. "Not everyone crossing is a good person. You don't know; until we bring them into our station, run biometric checks, we don't know their history either."

"So, if you see someone hiding in your neighborhood, hiding in your backyard, don't mess with them. Call. Don't try to be a hero; you don't know who they are."

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