

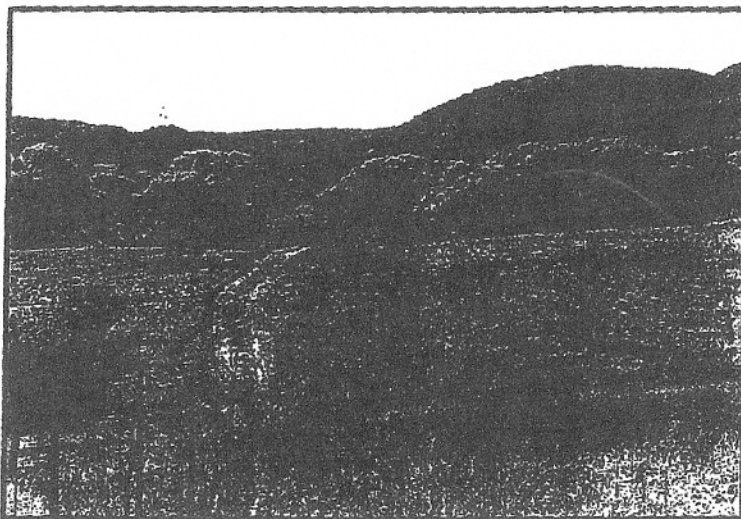
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January 2006

Intelligence Bulletin

Changes in Drug Seizures on the Arizona and Mexico Border



**Drug Enforcement Administration - Phoenix Division
Arizona HIDTA Investigative Support Center**





Introduction

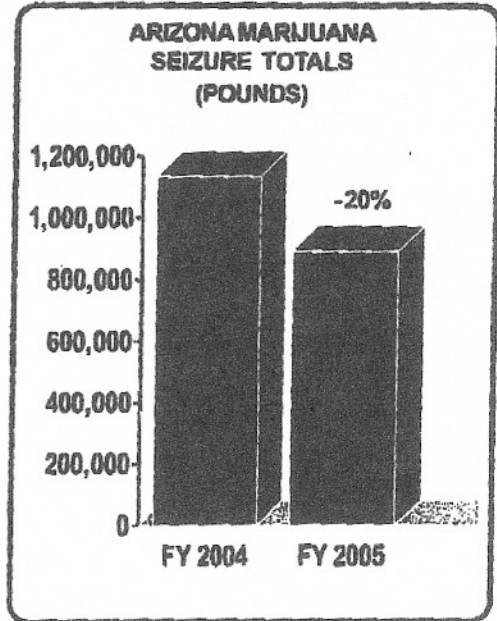
During fiscal year 2005, the state of Arizona experienced a decline in drug seizures, especially marijuana. This decline has also been seen in the other Southwest Border states of California, New Mexico and Texas. The Arizona HIDTA ISC and DEA Tucson analyzed current intelligence and accurate seizure information for purposes of this report; only the drug trafficking situation in Arizona is addressed. There appear to be several factors accounting for the decrease in drug seizures and resultant new overall illegal drug smuggling trend along the Arizona border with Mexico.

Statistical History and Perspective:

Fiscal Year (FY) 2005 seizures of marijuana by Arizona State, Local, Tribal and Federal law enforcement agencies totaled 894,741 pounds (lbs.). This represents a 20% (-238,377 lbs. or 119 tons) decline from FY 2004 seizures of 1,133,118 lbs. (Figure 1) The months of April and May, August, and September 2005, represent the highest monthly decline in marijuana seizures when compared to the remainder of FY 2005. A significant decrease was not witnessed in previous years during these same months.

Fiscal Year Historical comparison of the Average Marijuana Seizures during the Months of April - May and August - September time frames: (Pounds)

	<u>FYs 2002 - 2004</u>	<u>FY 2005</u>
April-	79,000(Avg)	62,375
May-	84,000(Avg)	72,205
August-	70,000 (Avg)	56,693
September-	50,000 (Avg)	36,135



(Figure 1)

There has also been a decrease in drug seizures in Arizona for cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine (pounds):

	Cocaine	Heroin	Meth.
FY 2004	9,511	149	2,173
FY 2005	7,011	52.5	1,913

Factors to consider:

April and May 2005

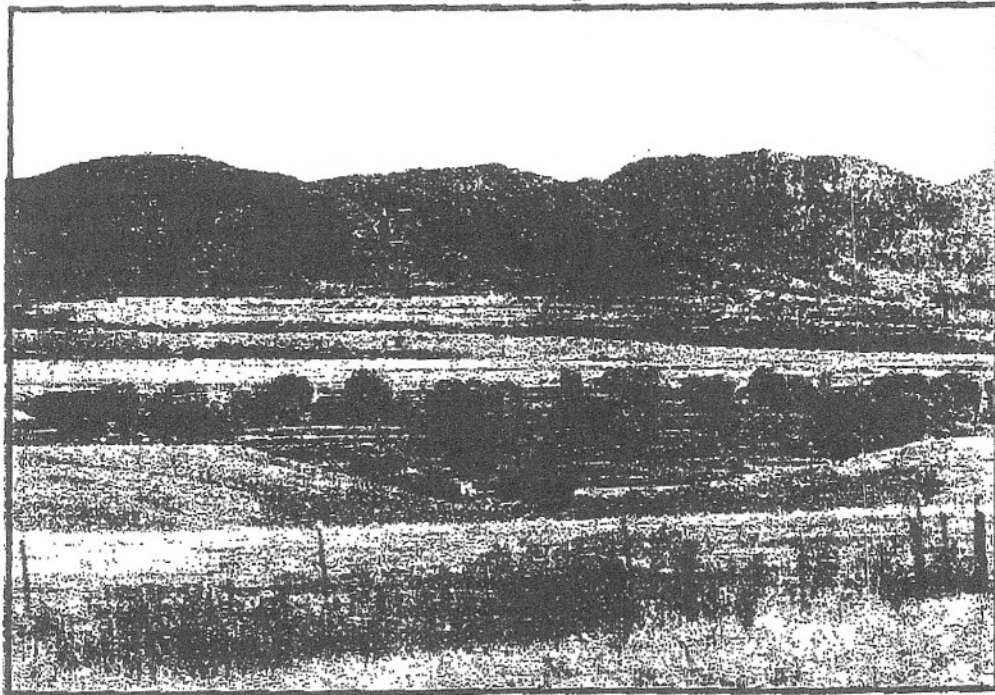
During the months of April and May 2005, several high-profile operations targeting illegal immigrant smuggling operations may have impacted drug smuggling operations and the normal flow of illegal drugs across the Arizona and Mexico border.



- During these months, the U.S. Government initiated *Operation Full Court Press* along the Arizona and Mexico Border. This multiple law enforcement agency effort was established to curtail illegal alien smuggling into the U.S., with the placement of additional law enforcement presence along the border. This operation received widespread press coverage in the U.S. and in Mexico, specifically the Mexican state of Sonora.
- During the months of April and May 2005, *Operation COBIJA XVII*, a nationwide U.S. drug interdiction effort was concurrently conducted by local, state, tribal and federal law enforcement agencies all along the Arizona border with Mexico and throughout Arizona. Although this operation does not receive widespread press coverage, previous COBIJA operations have indicated

illegal alien and drug smuggling organizations are aware of the increased interdiction efforts by all law enforcement agencies arrayed along the Arizona and Mexico border.

- During the months of April and May 2005, a high-profile campaign was conducted by numerous anti-illegal alien concerned citizen groups, collectively known as the *Minuteman Project*. This campaign took place along the Arizona border with Mexico. The Minuteman Project received international press coverage and was designed by these groups to draw attention to the immigration issues along the U.S. border with Mexico. Members of these groups conducted 24- hour observation and lookouts along the Arizona and Mexico Border and reported illegal smuggling activities by radio to law enforcement agencies.



Above: Lochiel Gate is located on the southern Arizona border with Mexico. This area is heavily used by illegal immigrant and drug smugglers. This area was patrolled by members of the Minuteman Project during the Spring of 2005.



- In Mexico, President Vicente Fox's administration announced the start of the *Secure Mexico Plan*, and the specific initiative in the Mexican state of Sonora, known as *Operation Sonora - Arizona*. This plan was reported to be in response to concerns in Mexico of increased border violence and possible illegal immigrant deaths in the remote desert areas crossing into the U.S., specifically Arizona. As a result, Mexican military elements were deployed to locations along the Mexico and U.S. border in an effort to deter Mexican nationals from crossing into the U.S. The presence of military elements from other areas of Mexico deployed to the State of Sonora could have resulted in the disruption in the normal flow of drugs through Sonora or re-directed it to areas where the military elements were not deployed. The focus of these operations initially during the months of April and May, was to concentrate on areas known for illegal alien smuggling and staging areas in border towns. This operation changed focus in August and September to focus more on checkpoints in Sonora to interdict drugs coming north through Sonora.

As a result of the above high-profile operations along the border in the U.S. and in Mexico, specifically in Sonora, it is feasible to conclude that these efforts to disrupt illegal alien smuggling operations, also affected the normal flow of illegal drugs into Arizona. It is interesting to note that drug seizures increased and normalized back to monthly seizure averages after these operations were completed. But the flow was interrupted enough to indicate there remains a backlog of drugs in the system.

Analyst Note: It is possible that due to the increased anti-illegal immigrant smuggling operations conducted during this time frame by U.S. law enforcement elements, these efforts could have diverted attention or resources away from drug interdiction efforts, focusing more on the anti-illegal immigrant smuggling operations. Equally important to consider is that traditionally these two months are considered as the high months before the hot summer months begin in the desert South West. Therefore, illegal alien smuggling organizations, that also traffic in illegal drugs could ramp up efforts to move more illegal immigrants during these months and scale back on their respective drug smuggling efforts.

August and September 2005:

Initial analysis of drug seizures in Arizona for the months of August and September indicate a decline in drug seizures compared to previous months and years.

The increased presence of Mexican military elements under *Operation Sonora - Arizona*, deployed at key transportation checkpoints for drug interdiction in northern Sonora has resulted in a concomitant decrease in seizures in Arizona for August and September 2005. It is too early to determine how this might affect drug smuggling across the Arizona border long-term. However, consistent intelligence reports indicate a current backlog of marijuana and cocaine stashed in Sonora, due to transportation disruption by Mexican authorities.



- There have been no COBIJA-coordinated interdiction efforts and operations during the Spring 2005. There are none planned for the Spring 2006.

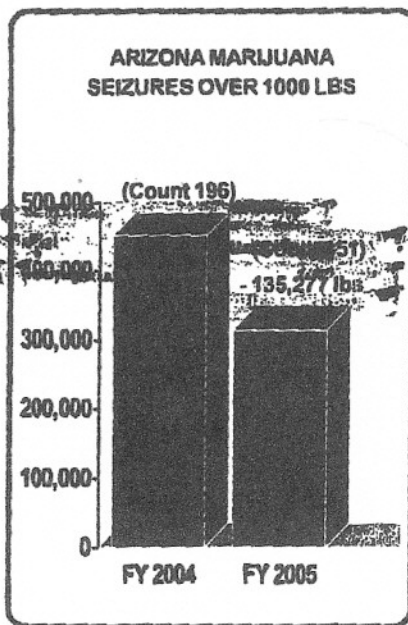
Decrease in Large Marijuana Loads:

The Arizona HIDTA ISC has previously reported that drug trafficking groups transporting illegal drugs into Arizona were very confident to move large loads of marijuana, consisting of at least 1,000 lbs., across remote areas of Southern Arizona, especially between the Ports-of-Entry (POEs). This theory was substantiated by the unprecedented number of large marijuana loads seized during FY 2004. (Figure 2)

One key variable to consider in explaining the drop in large marijuana seizures, between the POEs, is that the National Park Service has constructed a 20-mile vehicle barrier along the Organ Pipe National Monument. This barrier is located along the Arizona/Mexico border near the Lukeville POE. Historically, due to the roads and terrain, this area is heavily traveled by illegal immigrants and drug smuggling organizations. Vehicles attempting to cross the U.S. border illegally must now divert around the vehicle barrier and around the Lukeville POE, which is seen more of a nuisance to these smuggling organizations.

A recent example of the unusual smuggling tactics employed by drug trafficking organizations attempting to smuggle illegal drugs into Arizona and a sign that the dynamics of drug smuggling along the Arizona border with Mexico is changing, can be seen in the October 26, 2005, seizure of 1034 pounds of marijuana in Lordsburg, New Mexico. In this instance a tractor-trailer was transporting the load of marijuana from El Paso, Texas to Tucson, Arizona.

This smuggling attempt is the historic opposite of all recent tractor-trailer related drug seizures occurring in south New Mexico and possibly an attempt to avoid Sonora checkpoints and U.S. law enforcement in Arizona.



(Figure 2)

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Smuggling Change

The dynamics of drug smuggling along the southern Arizona border could be changing in a way that will affect law enforcement agencies on both sides. First, marijuana has been traditionally smuggled across the border in the more remote areas, including small staging towns in Mexico. Cocaine, Methamphetamine and Heroin were rarely seized outside of the POEs or main transportation corridors across the border into Southern Arizona. However, with the growth of these smaller Mexican border towns such as Aqua Prieta, Sasabe, Sonoyta, Lukeville and further south, the town of Altar, that cater to supporting illegal alien smuggling, there is now a more established infrastructure to support drug stashing and staging in these remote areas.

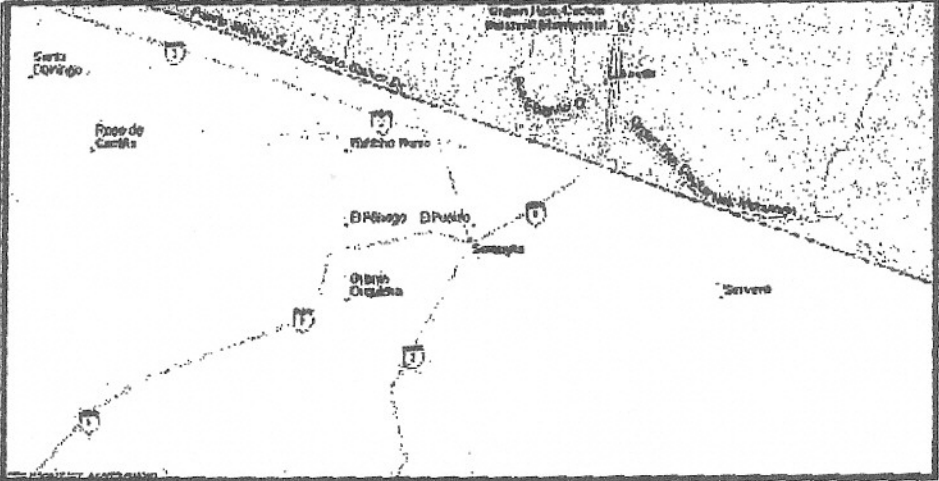
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Conclusion

Smuggling organizations have proven they are flexible and are constantly changing tactics in response to law enforcement efforts. Intelligence from numerous sources indicates these smuggling groups act as a key logistical piece in transporting illegal drugs from Mexico to distribution groups in Arizona. These groups work as semi-autonomous and independent contractors, willing to work in compartmentalized functions in the overall smuggling apparatus. Although drug seizures in Arizona are down during FY 2005, it appears that when U.S. and Mexican interdiction efforts cease, the normal flow will continue. In the case of the more remote border towns which grew to support illegal alien smuggling operations, there now exists an even more enhanced logistical drug trafficking infrastructure in these remote areas.

Recent aerial photography documents the growth of these small border towns. (See photos on page 7 and 8) It is possible that cocaine and methamphetamine smuggling could become more prevalent in these more remote POEs and areas around these POEs.

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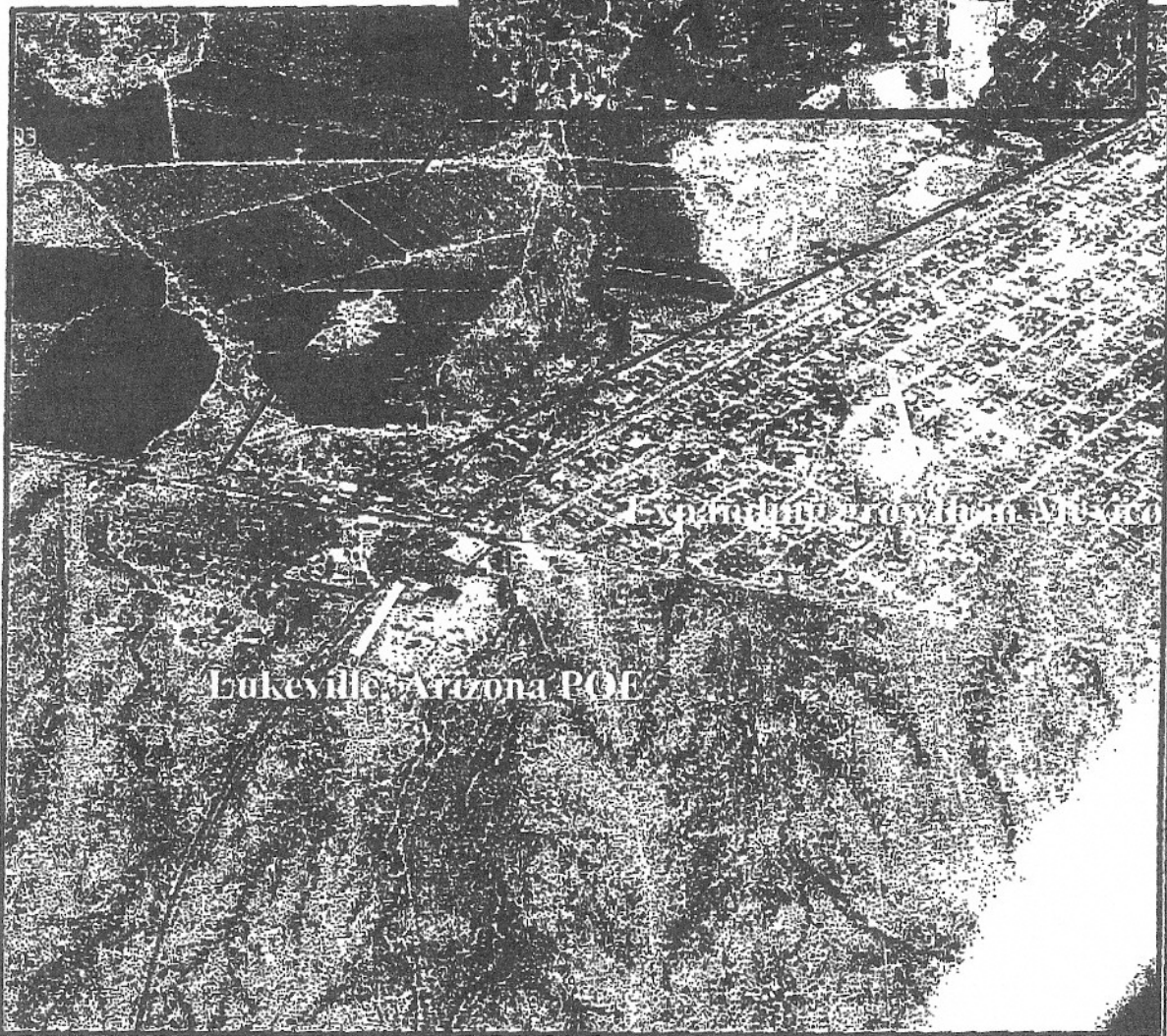
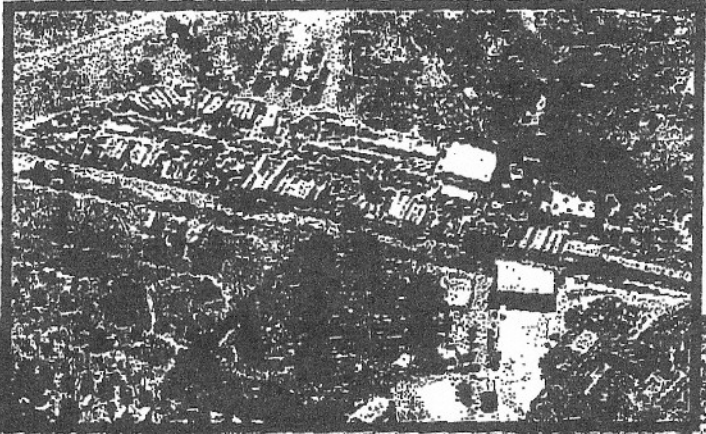


Above Map: Sonoyta, Sonora, is located in Mexico across from the Organ Pipe National Monument and Lukeville, Arizona. Sonoyta is positioned at an ideal transportation cross roads of Mexico Route 8, originating from Puerto Penasco, Mexico on the Gulf of Baja and Mexico Route 2 from Caborca, Mexico.

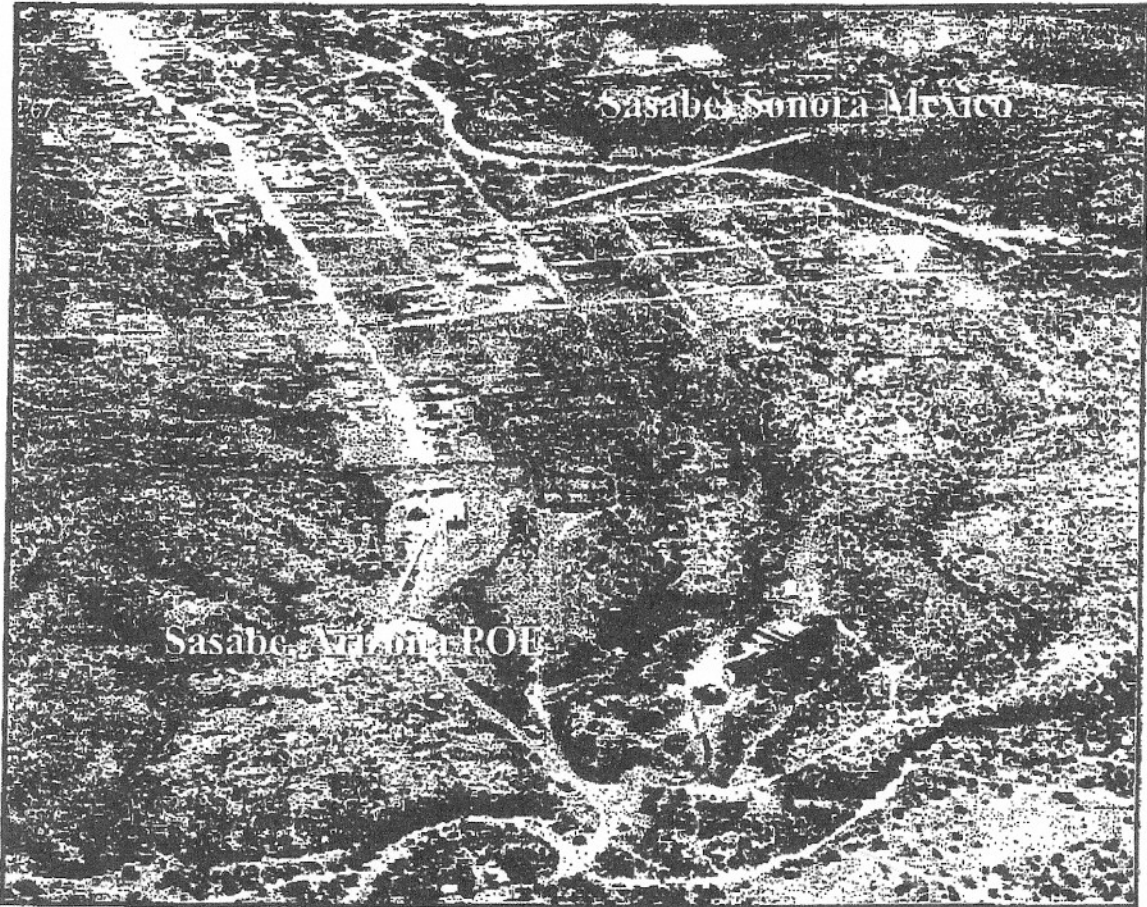
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This could increase the flow of illegal drugs across the Arizona and Mexico border. There is likely to be a push or surge by smuggling organizations to move already backlogged illegal drug loads into Arizona from Sonora, Mexico. Current seizure information for the first three months of FY 2006, indicates that in fact marijuana seizures are up significantly.



Above: The remote Lukeville, Arizona POE, opposite to the expanding town of Sonoyta, Sonora, Mexico. Below: Aerial photo: large tractor trailer and vehicle storage area in Sonoyta, Sonora that could be used for illegal drug stashing, awaiting transport into Arizona. See photo next page.



Above: Sasabe, Sonora located across from the remote Sasabe, Arizona POE and Tohono O'odham Reservation has expanded to support illegal immigrant and drug smuggling from Mexico into Arizona .



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