

The Herald

Border Battleground – Day Two

Meth traffic picking up at local border

By *SERGIO CHAPA*
The Brownsville Herald

BROWNSVILLE, August 15, 2005 — Local law enforcement officials report that the use of methamphetamines remains low in the Rio Grande Valley but some say the seeds have been sown for its consumption to grow.

The drug first appeared in California in the 1960s, but recent reports from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency show it has become a scourge to dozens of communities in northern Texas and the Midwest.



In the past two years, methamphetamines, or “meth,” has appeared on the streets of East Coast cities and grown in popularity in dance clubs.

DEA figures also show that increasing amounts of the drug are produced in Mexico and smuggled into the United States.

In 2003, U.S. Customs agents seized 1,067 pounds of meth at Texas’ 24 international bridges. Federal court records show a growing share of that traffic as coming through Brownsville and South Texas.

In the past year, federal authorities have arrested or convicted five people for smuggling more than 56 pounds of methamphetamines through Cameron and Willacy counties.

The most recent arrests were those of two sisters from Houston who tried to smuggle 2.6 pounds of meth along with 42 pounds of cocaine and 21,000 pills of ecstasy through the Veterans International Bridge at Los Tomates on July 17.

Despite the heavy traffic, Lt. Adrian Mascorro with the Brownsville Police Department’s Special Investigations Unit said local arrests show that the drug is not being used or sold in the area at any significant levels.

Mascorro said the department’s last meth arrest was reported more than five years ago.

“He was from out of town and staying at a hotel,” Mascorro said. “We believe he brought it with him and did not buy it here.”

Although Brownsville police records show no arrests or seizures for meth since that incident, prison minister Drew Vail said the conditions are right for the drug to take root in the Rio Grande Valley.

Vail said area drug users have already developed a taste for hard drugs such as crack cocaine prompting a wave of burglaries and other crimes.

“It’s coming,” Vail said of methamphetamines. “Just wait till they find out it’s cheaper than cocaine.”

Street prices vary, but a DEA report show that the average wholesale price of meth is \$20 a gram compared to \$25 a gram for cocaine.

Others point to Mexico as an example of an area that was once only thought of as simply a transit point for illegal drugs, but has now become its own market.

Figures from Mexico's National Council Against Addictions (CONADIC) and the Secretary of Health show that 1.3 million Mexicans suffer from addiction to one or more illegal drugs.

Although methamphetamines consumption remains low in Mexico, the result of addiction to marijuana, cocaine, crack and heroin has been a growing number of petty and violent crimes as well as drug-related deaths.

U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza said the Mexican government is barely beginning to recognize how corrosive drugs are to their society.

"Drugs are like salt water through machinery, it just corrodes," Garza said of Mexico's growing drug problem. "It affects your judicial systems, leadership, elected offices and police force."

Ray D'Alessio with the DEA's regional office in Houston said U.S. and Mexican authorities are working to stop the flow of methamphetamines from Mexico.

Other efforts to control meth production include the monitoring and regulation of its key ingredients such as pseudoephedrine, the active ingredient in most over-the-counter cold medications, on both sides of the border.

D'Alessio said stricter state laws regulating the sale of cold medications have prompted manufacturers in Texas and the United States to use other household substitutes such as disinfectants, lye, acetone and ammonia creating potentially more dangerous forms of the drug.

"The individual chemicals that go into making meth are toxic," D'Alessio said. "A user never knows what they're getting."

schapa@brownsvilleherald.com