

San Diego Tunnel Task Force uncovers sophisticated cross-border drug tunnel under the US/Mexico border

Federal agents seize 4,400 pounds of illicit drugs from the tunnel's exit in the US



SAN DIEGO – Federal agents on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force uncovered a sophisticated drug smuggling tunnel on Thursday, March 19, which extends under the United States-Mexico border to a warehouse in a commercial complex in the Otay Mesa area of San Diego. The discovery of the tunnel resulted from an ongoing investigation by members on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force, which include U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Border Patrol, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the United States Attorney's Office.

Agents on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force developed information about a transnational criminal organization suspected of smuggling narcotics into the U.S. via a cross-border tunnel. As the investigation progressed, agents worked in cooperation with the Fiscalia General de la Republica (FGR) and Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) to locate the tunnel entrance in Mexico. Agents subsequently presented evidence to a U.S. federal judge and obtained a federal search warrant for the warehouse in Otay Mesa. The U.S. exit point was discovered subsequent to the execution of the warrant.

Agents seized approximately 1,300 pounds of cocaine, 86 pounds of methamphetamine, 17 pounds of heroin, 3,000 pounds of marijuana and more than two pounds of fentanyl from the tunnel. The large seizure of mixed drugs represents the first time in San Diego's history where five different types of drugs were found inside a tunnel. The total street value of the drugs seized from the tunnel is estimated at \$29.6 million.

The tunnel extends for more than 2,000 feet underground from a warehouse in Tijuana, Mexico to a warehouse in the Otay Mesa area of San Diego. The tunnel has an average depth of 31 feet and is three-feet wide through most of the passageway.

Agents estimate the tunnel has been in existence for several months due to the advanced construction observed in several portions of the passageway, which included reinforced walls, ventilation, lighting and an underground rail system.

“I’m proud of the excellent work performed by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) agents, as well as U.S. Border Patrol and Drug Enforcement Administration agents as integrated partners of the San Diego Tunnel Task Force. Their tenacity made the difference in shutting down this tunnel,” said Cardell T. Morant, acting special agent in charge of HSI San Diego. “I hope this sends a clear message that despite the ongoing public health crisis, HSI and our law enforcement partners will remain resilient and continue to pursue criminal organizations responsible for the cross-border smuggling of narcotics into the United States.”

“Several months ago, agents on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force announced the seizure of the longest cross-border tunnel and today we announce the discovery of another sophisticated tunnel with large quantities of drugs seized from within,” said DEA Special Agent in Charge John W. Callery. “These tunnels show the determination of drug trafficking organizations to subvert our border controls and smuggle deadly drugs into our community. But these recent tunnel seizures also show the dedication of our amazing partners on the San Diego Tunnel Task Force to locate and shut down these tunnels to keep our communities safe. Despite the current COVID-19 pandemic, DEA employees continue to work tirelessly to serve and protect the community.”

“I’m immensely proud of the dedication and diligence of agents on the task force to shut down this tunnel. Cross-border tunnels represent one of the most significant threats to our national security. Criminal organizations can use these tunnels to introduce anything they want into the U.S. This is especially concerning during a global pandemic,” said Chief Patrol Agent Aaron M. Heitke.

“If cartels keep spending millions of dollars building tunnels, we will keep finding and filling them,” said U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer. “This time, we seized a jaw-dropping \$30 million worth of dangerous drugs that aren’t going to reach the streets. This is the most valuable single-day tunnel seizure in recent memory, and it is the largest seizure of multiple drugs in a single tunnel. This takedown is even more significant in the face of a global pandemic, where stopping the movement of unauthorized people and packages across international borders is of utmost importance.” Brewer praised the excellent work of the San Diego Tunnel Task Force in locating and dismantling yet another cross-border drug tunnel, especially the efforts of AUSA Orlando Gutierrez.

Throughout the investigation, the San Diego Tunnel Task Force received substantial support from the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department.

“The Sheriff’s Department remains committed to protecting the citizens of San Diego County from the dangers associated with the importation, sales, and use of illegal drugs, as well as the violent crimes associated with them,” said San Diego Sheriff William Gore. “By working collaboratively with agencies like Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and groups like the Tunnel Task Force, we work tirelessly to

achieve this mission. These partnerships are key to achieving these goals. We would like to recognize the hard work and dedication of these detectives and agents who worked tirelessly on this case. We thank them for their efforts.”

The San Diego Tunnel Task Force would like to thank the Government of Mexico authorities for their cooperation in this bi-lateral investigation.

Tunnels like this bring large quantities of dangerous drugs and violence into our communities. Law enforcement often relies on the public’s assistance in identifying the location of these tunnels. Anyone may anonymously report suspicious activity to the Tunnel Task Force at 1-877-9TUNNEL (1-877-988-6635).