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Border Patrol to build fencing

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By Jerry Seper and Stephen Dinan - The U.S. Border Patrol is asking for volunteers among its agents to help build fences on the U.S.-Mexico border, even as President Bush is withdrawing half the National Guard troops he sent there last year to build fences.

A memo circulated last week to Border Patrol sector chiefs said fence-building efforts on the Southwest border were going to fall short of Mr. Bush's goal of finishing 70 miles in fiscal 2007, which ends Sept. 30, "so the Border Patrol is now going back into the fence-building business."

The memo, a copy of which was obtained by The Washington Times, called on the chiefs to provide lists of agents who "can and have built fences in the past," adding that the agency was looking for welders, equipment operators and "anyone else with construction experience."

"They are moving quickly on this, so your sector's response will be needed back here by noon tomorrow," said the Aug. 6 memo, which asked that the entire Border Patrol be canvassed for agents qualified and able to work on fence construction.

Rich Pierce, executive vice president of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents the agency's 11,000 non-supervisory agents, said that while the Bush administration "on one hand is trying to convince the American public it is serious about immigration enforcement," it has failed to provide the needed funding and manpower.

"Meanwhile, the other hand reduces the National Guard by 50 percent, whose job to build the border fence has hardly started," he said. "Now the Border Patrol agents who were meant to replace the National Guard are pulled from border enforcement and tasked with building the fence.

"The president's game of pretending to enforce our border continues," he said. "He has never been serious about this issue at all."

In May 2006, Mr. Bush ordered 6,000 National Guard troops to the Southwest border as part of "Operation Jump Start" to give the Border Patrol time to recruit, hire, train and assign 6,000 new agents — the largest expansion in the agency's history.

Mr. Bush stressed at the time the National Guard troops were not there to be law-enforcement agents, but rather to build fencing, vehicle barriers and buildings, as well as to help with surveillance. He said the initial commitment of 6,000 troops would last for a year,

after which it would be reduced as new Border Patrol agents and technologies came online.

"We have magnificently trained young men and women, but they are not trained as Border Patrol agents; they are trained as soldiers and airmen," Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, said last year, telling reporters they would focus on infrastructure and free the Border Patrol up to enforce the law.

"Engineering makes good sense to me. Barrier-building makes good sense. We have had a long success of that. Building roads makes sense. Putting in anti-vehicle barriers makes sense. Putting in lighting and fencing makes sense," he said.

Last week, the Bush administration said Operation Jump Start was "on track" and, as scheduled, the number of troops would be drawn down to 3,000 by Sept. 30.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Deputy Commissioner Jay Ahern, who is responsible for overseeing border security, called the decision to recruit Border Patrol volunteers to build the fence "an appropriate use of resources."

Mr. Ahern said the agency was not "shying away" from its responsibilities in completing the 70 miles of fencing.

"This is a temporary bridge to use Border Patrol agents to meet the mandate of 70 miles by September 30. We are a can-do organization that can meet our goals," he said, adding that building fences along the border will enhance and not compromise border security.

White House spokeswoman Emily A. Lawrimore said the Border Patrol would have to answer questions about the memo calling for volunteers, and she would not comment on the decision to draw down Guard troops except to say they were "intended to provide temporary support to the Border Patrol while it recruited more agents and infrastructure projects were started."

In October, Mr. Bush signed a law committing to fence nearly 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. The Secure Fence Act culminated a two-year debate in Congress over immigration, won by House Republicans who insisted on an enforcement-first policy.

The bill authorizes double-tiered fencing and support roads along some of the most-porous parts of the U.S.-Mexico border, including much of Arizona — the nation's leading immigration and drug-smuggling corridor.

As of June, 13 miles of new border fencing had been built.