

## BORDER SECURITY

# Drug cartels spend millions on elaborate tunnels

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The discovery of the most sophisticated drug tunneling system into the United States from Mexico yet uncovered has troubled federal anti-drug officials, who were shocked by the scope of the project and what it could indicate about the amount of drugs, weapons and material sought by terrorists that is smuggled into the country.

The more than 600-yard tunnel, outfitted with a full-length rail car system, secret elevators, hydraulic doors, electric lighting and sophisticated structural stability, cost roughly \$2 million to build.

Still, that was a bargain compared with the \$65 million street value of the 32 tons of marijuana a Mexican cartel was attempting to move through when federal agents busted them Tuesday.

The tunnel is one of seven discovered in the past five years in the San Diego area. More than 75 tunnels have been discovered all along the U.S.-Mexican border since 2007.

"What's worrisome about these tunnels is the potential for things to get through that we don't know," said Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman Rusty Payne. "What might have already come through them before their discovery or the ones that are out there that we don't know about."

A six-month investigation by members of the Tunnel Task Force composed of DEA, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Border Patrol agents got a break in the case when a truck was spotted leaving the warehouse in Otay Mesa, in the San Diego area, said San Diego DEA Special Agent Amy Roderick.



ALEX COSSIO/AP

A view from inside a drug tunnel system recently found in the border city of Tijuana, Mexico, on Wednesday.

Federal agents stopped the truck when it arrived in Los Angeles with nearly 11 tons of marijuana inside. Agents seized an additional 17 tons at the warehouse and more inside the tunnel, she said.

"We suspect it's the Sinaloa cartel," said Roderick, referring to Mexico's most notorious drug organization, run by Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman. "But the investigation is ongoing and we can't be certain."

Michael Braun, former administrator and chief of operations at the DEA, said federal investigators want to know who is helping the cartels with the engineering and construction of the elaborate tunnels.

"You don't just get picks and shovels and get a half a dozen guys and tell them to get to work," Braun said. "If they can move tons of drugs, what else are they moving?"

Lauren Mack, spokeswoman for ICE in San Diego, said the Tunnel Task Force was formed in 2003 to address the national security threat posed by the increase of illegal passageways into the United States.

"When the [cartels] went underground it was a huge red flag, and that was the reason why we created the Tunnel Task Force," Mack said. "These tunnels are definitely the work of an architect, a specialist or

expert in the mining industry."

Mack said federal agents want to find and arrest the skilled designers and engineers who help construct the tunnels.

"Finding these architects is very important," said Mack, who noted that federal agents with the task force are also trained in mining and tunnel design. "It's something that we're looking closely at."

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