

Border Patrol agents on North Fork to increase from four to 50-plus

North Forkers will experience an ever-increasing number of U.S. Border Patrol vehicles and agents in this and coming years, as the agency implements Operation Stone Garden, a federal program mandating an increase in the patrolling of both U.S. borders with the involvement of local law enforcement agencies.

David Jet Abegglen, patrol agent in charge at the Whitefish Border Patrol office, says that now there are approximately 25 agents in his charge, and that current plans are to increase the number to 50. There were four agents working the North Fork on Sept. 11, 2001.

The 36.2 miles of Canadian border from the Continental Divide to the Lincoln County line are patrolled out of the Whitefish office. There is no official border crossing on the North Fork Road, the only road in this jurisdiction leading to the Canadian border.

According to a story in the Jan. 14 Hungry Horse News, agents are patrolling our section of the border in motor vehicles, on foot, and on horseback, snowmobiles, ATVs and watercraft.

“There is no maximum number of agents that may be assigned to any one station,” Abegglen told us in an e-mail. “The current threat analysis for the Whitefish Station calls for 50 agents to mitigate current threats. Threat analysis is always ongoing. As the threat evolves, our projection for manpower and other resources will continue to change,” he wrote.

Currently, the Flathead County Sheriff’s department is receiving a six-figure-per-year grant from the federal government to ride along with Border Patrol agents. In earlier meetings with Abegglen and Patrol Lieutenant Brad Stahlberg of the Flathead County Sheriff’s Office, we learned that deputies would be “running radar” and performing other duties on the North Fork. In addition, the Border Patrol has delegated authority from the Drug Enforcement Administration to look for illegal drugs.

“The 2010 Operation Stone Garden order was recently submitted to Border Patrol Headquarters in Washington D.C.,” Abegglen wrote. “In this most recent request, I asked for more funding and solicited for additional participating agencies. This will be the largest effort for Flathead County since the inception of Operation Stone Garden,” Abegglen told us in an e-mail. “I expect Operation Stone Garden will be funded at a record level in the Flathead and will continue through at least 12/31/2012,” Abegglen wrote.

According to the Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia, the number of agents on the Canadian border was 340 in 2001, and was to increase to 1,845 by the end of 2009, numbers Abegglen confirmed. Currently, he told us, there are more than 20,000 Border Patrol agents nationwide.

“Congress has mandated the Border Patrol to reach 2,212 agents on the Northern Border by the end of Fiscal Year 2010,” Abegglen stated in his e-mail. “With this mandate and current pending personnel changes, the number of agents at the Whitefish Station will change several times this

summer. I believe that the general trend will be that we will continue to increase in numbers.”

The Department of Homeland Security’s June 2009 fact sheet states that in 2008, 97.4 percent of apprehensions of foreign nationals who had entered the United States illegally occurred in the Southwest; 1.5 percent occurred in coastal areas; 1.1 percent occurred on the Canadian border.

Finally, the Border Patrol has established a “National Web Information Tip System” (at <https://www.tipsubmit.com/WebTips.aspx?AgencyID=612%20%20>), through which citizens may report suspicious activities, persons and vehicles. Items in the report form include a suspect’s description, employment and gang affiliation; vehicle information; drug activity; and information about the suspected crime.

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