

Eight major fires blamed on illegal immigrants

The Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. — Illegal border crossers in southern Arizona are suspected of causing eight major wildfires this year, at a suppression cost to taxpayers of \$5.1 million.

The fires charred 68,413 acres — about 108 square miles — according to an *Arizona Daily Star* review of public records and interviews with land managers. Only fires bigger than 100 acres were included in the analysis, but officials said border crossers caused many smaller blazes that were quickly controlled.

In total, Southern Arizona has had 17 fires greater than 100 acres in 2002, according to the Southwest Area Wildland Fire Operations center in Albuquerque, N.M. Those wildfires burned 113,431 acres.

Besides extending an already busy fire season, the presence of border crossers in the backcountry is causing fire managers to rethink some of their strategies.

“We’re in a new era,” said Brian Lauber, fire management officer for the Arizona State Land Department.

Fire officials haven’t identified individual suspects in the eight major wildfires, but they said physical evidence at their origins strongly points to border crossers.

Food containers, juice cans and water bottles from Mexico were found at many of the fires’ starting points, nearly all of which were along popular smuggling routes rarely used by legal visitors. In some cases, the blazes were traced back to escaped campfires that officials believe border crossers used for cooking or warmth.

A ninth major fire — called Gardner 2 — began May 13 when a Border Patrol helicopter sliced a power line near Sonoita with its tail rotor, according to a completed Forest Service investigation. That 467-acre fire, which cost \$121,585 to fight, was ruled accidental, so no charges were filed against the pilot.

Besides starting some wildfires, illegal entrants are altering how blazes near the border are fought.

Officials are waiting longer than usual to light intentional backburns for fear of trapping border crossers in the flames. What’s more, some fire managers worry that crews working in remote locations might surprise armed drug smugglers ready to defend their loads.

“Our thanks to God should always precede our requests.”

- Source Unknown