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Bush gets up-close look at border on Yuma visit Agents escort president on 45-minute tour

Arizona Daily Star
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By Daniel Scarpinato, Arizona Daily Star

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YUMA — Just like one of those dust devils out along the interstate, [President Bush](#) was here Thursday — and then, just like that, he was gone.

His stop of less than four hours in this city of 88,000 was Bush's latest move to sell his immigration reform plan, unveiled to the American public during an Oval Office address Monday. Thursday he called that plan "fair and effective."

"I understand that illegal immigration is a serious problem," Bush said during an address to about 100 people. "And one of our jobs in public office is to fix problems."

The visit gave him a chance to see the border up close and personal, officials with the U.S. Border Patrol's Yuma Sector said.

To help Bush better understand the illegal-immigration-related woes of a state like Arizona, agents escorted the president on a 45-minute tour of the nearby Mexican border. Bush was shown the border fencing and new technology and got to ride in a dune buggy, agents said.

At San Luis, the border city south of Yuma, President Bush peered across a hot, dusty and increasingly busy illegal crossing point, hoping to convince local residents and conservatives in Congress that he's serious about tightening the nation's 2,000-mile border with Mexico.

The president's visit showed off a section of the border that is seeing a rising tide of illegal entrants and other smuggling. The United States is responding with increased manpower — including help from the National Guard — and a newly beefed-up enforcement zone that features two layers of tall fencing, a concrete culvert, floodlights, watchtowers and camera surveillance.

Bush's motorcade took him to a section of 6.9 miles of fencing that guards this area, the nation's newest immigrant-smuggling hot spot. The president climbed up to a berm overlooking the 150-foot-wide border enforcement zone, which has recently added a new secondary fence of chain links and razor wire to a 20-foot-tall wall of corrugated metal.

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Guided by Border Patrol officials and Gov. Janet Napolitano, the president also reviewed a line of Border Patrol vehicles and display booths.

While the president visited the border, the Senate continued a heated debate over broad legislation that would largely do what Bush wants.

It includes measures to tighten control over the borders, create a guest-worker program and offer a path to citizenship for many of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country. Later, during a roughly 20-minute address, Bush reiterated his pledge to send 6,000 National Guardsmen to the border.

But he also continued to walk a fine line over an issue that has split Arizonans — and their politicians.

It was only last month that thousands in Tucson, Phoenix and Yuma took to the streets to protest restrictive immigration policies. The protests closed businesses and led to student walkouts.

"It's time to get rid of all the politics . . . and help you do your job," Bush told the patrolmen who flanked him.

In addition to Napolitano, U.S. Reps. Jeff Flake, Trent Franks, J.D. Hayworth, Jim Kolbe and John Shadegg accompanied the president on his tour.

Napolitano has said she supports sending guardsmen to the border. Hayworth, echoing reservations within the Republican Party about amnesty, has been more critical of Bush's approach, particularly the idea of setting up a path to legalization for those who have been in the country illegally.

But Bush defended his plan.

"In this debate, no one should be given automatic citizenship. That's amnesty. I oppose amnesty," he said. Instead Bush wants illegal immigrants to pay back taxes, hold down a job and learn English.

"Some'll say, 'That's amnesty.' That ain't amnesty," he said.

Border Patrol officials said they welcome the guardsmen.

"We've anticipated this, and we're ready," said Richard Hays, a supervisory border agent. "I think it's going to be an exciting time."

Hays said that by performing support functions, guardsmen would free up time for border agents to apprehend border crossers. The help is needed here, Hays said.

Since the start of the fiscal year Oct. 1, the Border Patrol's Yuma station has become the busiest station in the nation with more than 84,000 apprehensions, up from about 77,000 a year ago. The Yuma Sector has had a total of about 96,000 apprehensions this fiscal year, up from about 86,000 last year.

The next-busiest station is the Tucson station with more than 73,000 apprehensions this year. The Tucson Sector remains the busiest sector in the country with 280,000 apprehensions this fiscal year, down from 297,000 a year ago, a reduction of about 5 percent.

Bush's visit was also a major photo-op, from his landing at Yuma's Marine Corps Air Station ~~about 10 a.m. to his departure around 1:30 p.m.~~

Nearly half of the more than 200 people who were squeezed into the 40-foot-square room where Bush spoke were with the national, Arizona and California media.

Local officials like Casey Prochaska, a member of the Yuma County Board of Supervisors, were also on hand.

Prochaska said she had seen the president once in Phoenix, but this was different.

"This was more meaningful because he was addressing a concern of our community," she said. That and she got her photo taken with him.

For his part, Bush seemed satisfied with his visit, reminding the audience that he calls Texas home.

"I've never been to Yuma before. I'd like to come back," he said.

Senate puts emphasis on English

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On StarNet: See more photos of the president's trip at azstarnet.com/slideshows

The vast majority of people caught smuggling immigrants across the border near San Diego are never prosecuted for the offense, demoralizing the Border Patrol agents making the arrests, according to an internal document obtained by The Associated Press. View a PDF of the document.

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