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Texas customs officials protest surveillance

United Press International
 EL PASO — An area Customs official said Wednesday they may appeal a department budget cut that will ground air patrols along the United States-Mexico border and possibly mean an increase in drug smuggling.

Robert Kessler of the El Paso office said regional commissioner Clarence Bingham of Houston had asked Washington to use an alterna-

tive to closing customs aviation surveillance programs in El Paso and Dallas and drastically reducing aviation personnel in the San Antonio office.

"We think it's for budgetary reasons," Kessler said. "Our regional commissioner in Houston is aware of it and has prepared a response. He has an alternative plan."

Tom Bailey, chief agent of the air support branch at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, said many drug smugglers from California already have begun flying contraband into Texas because they have heard radar operations are spread thin.

Officials in San Antonio said the cutback would involve decreasing 37 aircraft operators to six in the three air support branches covering Brownsville to El Paso and New Mexico.

Bailey did not openly criticize the move, but he said the staff was short-handed even before the reductions.

"We keep 21 people busy and could easily use more," he said. "With six people and two aircraft, you see we're coming down from 37 positions to a total of six. We're losing 31 positions within the three units. There's a drastic reduction in aircraft also."

Kessler said the two offices police

about two-thirds of the Texas border.

On Tuesday Washington Commissioner Robert Kessler announced he would delay the El Paso program two weeks.

Sen. Pete Domenici of New Mexico said he wrote President Carter asking him to halt such a move. Domenici said he and Rep. White of Texas asked Kessler to meet with them before taking further action.

Texas Attorney General Jim Mattox said Tuesday he sent a note to Kessler questioning the budget cuts.

"The progress we have in slowing the traffic of marijuana and other narcotics is placed in jeopardy if the Customs Service removes its assets from Texas," Hill told Kessler.

Hill said smugglers' planes have been crashing in Texas at the almost one a month for the past years but that amount was no more than 1 percent of the drug flights into the state.

Charles Conroy, Houston customs regional spokesman, said the plan "doesn't affect only the west. It affects the entire service. Right now we have sage that says 'take no further' until further notice."

The Battalion Classified

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Farm problem to

United Press International
 PLAINVIEW, Tex. — A spokesman for the North Plains Energy Consumer Association said Tuesday the Panhandle economy is stable but could suffer because farmers soon will be unable to meet irrigation costs.

Michael Merideth, the spokesman, told a hearing of a state energy resources committee headed by Rep. Joe Hanna, D-Breckenridge, that spiraling prices for natural gas used to pump water hundreds of feet from underground wells could force many Panhandle farmers to give up irrigation entirely.

"Even though we have underground water, it will not be economical to bring it to the surface due to energy costs," Merideth said.

Merideth said the Panhandle economy is stable with irrigated farming.

"Without irrigation there is boom and bust farming," he said.

Hanna's panel is gathering tes-

timony for a report on the energy in irrigation. The report is due next year.

Merideth said West Texas farmers, who depend on deep ground wells to help produce yields of their crops, face the ability of reverting to nonirrigated "dryland" farming.

He said natural gas accounts for 20 percent of the farming in the northern Panhandle.

A representative for dairy farmers, Bruce Rigger, said farmers paying 38 to 40 cents per cubic foot (MCF) before the price began rising. He said this year farmers will pay from \$1.35 to \$1.50 an MCF.

Rigger said to conserve water cut their fuel bills some plant in rows of two, skipping row between the pairs. He said this reduces water consumption 50 percent without significantly reducing the yield.

Max Lennon of the College of Agriculture at Texas Tech University said without irrigation single-crop cotton would be reduced 30 percent. Corn and wheat grown in High Plains would decrease 40 and 40 percent respectively, he said.

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