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Agency shifts focus of anti-drug efforts to long-term probes

HOUSTON (AP) — The poor results of a highly touted anti-drug effort on the waters off the Texas Gulf Coast has prompted U.S. Customs Service officials to order changes in the agency's narcotics operations, the *Houston Post* reported Sunday.

The new policies will shift the Customs Service's emphasis away from catching drug boats on the run and toward longer-term investigations, according to the copyright story.

The agency's problems include a glitchy, well-publicized radar operation that employees say has produced only one drug bust, a fleet of platform and cigarette boats that have made few major seizures and a 35 percent drop in drug busts at Houston-area seaports.

The overhaul in area operations relates to the agency's inability to find drugs in small boats and large commercial ships, despite the sizable efforts, the *Post* reported.

In fiscal 1988, the Customs Service's marine enforcement program in the Southwest netted only 429 pounds of cocaine, records show.

Internal customs statistics obtained by the *Post* show that drug seizures by customs inspectors in the Houston area fell by 35 percent between 1986 and 1988, from 116 to 76.

In that same time, the price of cocaine in Houston has dropped to \$15,000 from \$25,000 per kilo, an indicator that supply has increased.

Customs officials are still betting they can prove successful by emphasizing smaller boats and intensive searches of cargo brought by foreign vessels. The agency has beefed up its contraband enforcement team at area seaports.

Customs employees and supervisors, most of whom spoke to newspaper on the basis of anonymity, painted a picture of an agency hampered by poor planning and plagued

by low morale.

They pointed to the marine radar room, a central facet of "Operation Blue Fire," which was introduced with great fanfare in 1987.

Customs sources told the *Post* that employees of the high-tech radar room were not trained for the task and that the operation was useless, producing only one bust since 1987.

Agency officials acknowledge the radar room's shortcomings, but say its purpose was never as broad as employees believe. They also say it will prove useful in providing intelligence data in the future.

Convinced in 1986 that drug smugglers in Mexico were being choked off the Florida coast by law enforcement efforts there and would soon direct their vessels to the Texas area, the Customs Service built its marine effort virtually from scratch.

Three \$1 million radar platform boats, three cigarette-style boats and five utility boats came on line between July 1986 and October 1987. Customs increased its non-air operations staff 34 percent, though that figure includes more than the marine patrol.

The nerve-center was a \$5 million communications center in Houston. It was composed of two rooms: the marine radar room — which received signals from seven newly constructed radar transmitters along the Gulf Coast — and a vast communications room known as Sector.

"We've come to the realization, based on an exhaustive 1988 study, that we had to do things a lot smarter, that we couldn't just have boats plowing holes in the water on patrol and expect to uncover narcotics smuggling by pleasure vessels," said William Rosenblatt, assistant commissioner of customs for the enforcement division.

Crimestoppers seeks clues in ATM robberies

Two black males committed three robberies in Bryan-College Station during the week of Feb. 19.

Two of the robberies took place at Automatic Teller Machines when the suspects threatened customers with handguns, forced their way into the cars and demanded that the customers withdraw cash from the machines.

Witnesses describe the suspects as black males, approximately 20-23 years old, approximately six feet tall, thin builds, wearing dark clothing and dark ski masks.

Officials suggest ATM customers choose well-lighted areas, keep car doors locked, check the area before approaching and leave the area if something seems suspicious.

If you have any information regarding these robberies, please con-

Brazos County

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