



Search and Rescue Efforts for FY 2016

May 23, 2017

Fiscal Year 2017 Report to Congress



Homeland
Security

U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Message from the Acting Deputy Commissioner of CBP

May 23, 2017

I am pleased to present the following report, "Search and Rescue Efforts for FY 2016," which has been prepared by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The report was compiled pursuant to the language set forth in House Report 114-668 accompanying the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-31). It outlines search and rescue efforts during FY 2016 for each sector. This report also addresses the cause of death for each migrant and the federal costs related to search and rescue efforts, including any costs related to the identification of deceased individuals, the return or transfer of remains, and the notification of family members.



Pursuant to congressional requirements, this report is being provided to the following Members of Congress:

The Honorable John R. Carter
Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
Ranking Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable John Hoeven
Chairman, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. Please do not hesitate to contact my office at (202) 344-2001 or the Department's Chief Financial Officer (Acting), Stacy Marcott, at (202) 447-5751.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ronald D. Vitiello". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Ronald D. Vitiello
Acting Deputy Commissioner
U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Executive Summary

CBP components strive each day to secure our Nation's borders at and between the ports of entry. Securing our borders is our top priority. Security missions, however, often give way to rescue missions because of harsh environmental conditions. CBP is searching constantly for ways to address these challenges either through equipment and/or policy and program implementation. To alleviate these challenges, CBP's U.S. Border Patrol has several programs and initiatives focused on increasing border safety and minimizing the risk of migrant deaths.



Search and Rescue Effort for FY 2016

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I. Legislative Language

This document was compiled pursuant to the legislative language set forth in House Report 114-668 accompanying the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-31).

House Report 114-668 states:

CBP is directed to provide a report on its search and rescue activities during fiscal year 2016 within 60 days of enactment of this Act, as detailed in House Report 114–215. In addition, the report should address, to the extent possible, the cause of death for each migrant and the federal costs related to search and rescue efforts, including any costs related to the identification of deceased individuals; the return or transfer of remains; and the notification of family members.

House Report 114-215, which accompanies the FY 2016 DHS Appropriations Act (P.L. 114-113), states:

The Committee commends CBP’s search and rescue efforts, in particular the Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue (BORSTAR) Unit, and encourages CBP to expand its engagement with State and local counterparts and nongovernmental organizations in providing necessary medical aid and reducing deaths. Within 60 days of the date enactment of this Act, CBP shall provide a report to the Committee on its search and rescue efforts during the prior fiscal year, including the number of deaths by sector and a description of the methodology for counting such deaths; the number of rescue beacons by sector; the frequency of rescue beacon activation; and the number of individuals rescued by the Border Patrol as a result of rescue beacons. In addition, the briefing should address procedures for the identification of deceased individuals, cooperative activities with State and local governments and nonprofit organizations, procedures for responding to rescue beacons, distress calls, and missing persons reports, and plans for reducing border crossings and deaths in remote areas along and near the border.

II. Background

The United States Border Patrol (USBP) created the Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue (BORSTAR) Unit in 1998 in response to the growing number of injuries to Border Patrol agents and migrant deaths along our Nation's borders. BORSTAR is located at the USBP's Special Operations Group Headquarters in El Paso, Texas, and among USBP sectors.

BORSTAR provides specialized law enforcement, search and rescue response from conventional to high-risk Border Patrol Operations, Federal Emergency Management Agency mission assignments, national search and rescue operations, national special security events, and specialized training support that DHS directs for both domestic and foreign government agencies. BORSTAR is the only national law enforcement search and rescue entity with the capability to conduct tactical medical and search and rescue operations, and training for federal, state, local, and international government agencies. Since the inception of BORSTAR in 1998, the unit has evolved and enhanced its capabilities to fulfill the missions of DHS, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and USBP, both foreign and domestic.

On a national level, BORSTAR is located strategically to deploy rapidly throughout the United States. As part of Sector Special Operations Detachments, BORSTAR supports the *2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan* by conducting intelligence-driven operations to target transnational criminal organizations, high-risk areas, and crossborder criminal activity. BORSTAR is composed of experienced Border Patrol agents selected from all USBP sectors to complete the BORSTAR Selection and Training Course successfully.

The BORSTAR Selection and Training Course is a physically and mentally demanding course in which candidates are evaluated in various search and rescue techniques, tactical medicine, technical rescue, land navigation, communication, swift-water rescue, air operations, and the ability to work in a cohesive unit. Upon completion of the BORSTAR Selection and Training Course, BORSTAR agents receive additional advanced specialized training in emergency medical; tactical medicine; technical rope rescue; paramedic; austere medic; load planner; helicopter rope suspension training; rescue watercraft/boat operator; cold-weather operations; personnel recovery; small unit tactics; tactical combat casualty care; operations management and planning; and advanced dive, swift-water, and technical rope rescue operations.

III. Data Report

The table below outlines USBP’s search and rescue efforts during FY 2016, including the number of deaths by sector.

Search and Rescue Efforts by Sector (FY 2016)	
Rio Grande Sector	
Number of searches	N/A
Number of rescues	1,377
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths	130
o Environmental Exposure –Heat 42	
o Skeletal Remains 27	
o Water-Related 26	
o Undetermined 25	
o Other 4	
o Motor Vehicle-Related 3	
o Environmental Exposure – Cold 2	
o Train-Related 1	
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
Tucson Sector	
Number of searches	N/A
Number of rescues	1,409
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths	84
o Environmental Exposure – Heat 35	
o Skeletal Remains 12	
o Water-Related 0	
o Undetermined 7	
o Other 30	
o Motor Vehicle-Related 0	
o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0	
o Train-Related 0	
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
Yuma Sector	
Number of searches	17
Number of rescues	18
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked

Number of deaths o Environmental Exposure – Heat 1 o Skeletal Remains 0 o Water-Related 1 o Undetermined 3 o Other 1 o Motor Vehicle-Related 2 o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0 o Train-Related 0	8
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
El Paso Sector	
Number of searches	47
Number of rescues	21
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths o Environmental Exposure – Heat 3 o Skeletal Remains 0 o Water-Related 5 o Undetermined 0 o Other 0 o Motor Vehicle-Related 1 o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0 o Train-Related 0	9
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
San Diego Sector	
Number of searches	78
Number of rescues	47
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths o Environmental Exposure – Heat 0 o Skeletal Remains 3 o Water-Related 2 o Undetermined 1 o Other 1 o Motor Vehicle-Related 0 o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0 o Train-Related 0	7
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked

El Centro Sector	
Number of searches	13
Number of rescues	36
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths o Environmental Exposure – Heat 1 o Skeletal Remains 1 o Water-Related 6 o Undetermined 0 o Other 0 o Motor Vehicle-Related 1 o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0 o Train-Related 0	9
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
Laredo Sector	
Number of searches	108
Number of rescues	1,018
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths o Environmental Exposure – Heat 17 o Skeletal Remains 0 o Water-Related 15 o Undetermined 24 o Other 2 o Motor Vehicle-Related 8 o Environmental Exposure – Cold 2 o Train-Related 0	68
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
Del Rio Sector	
Number of searches	24
Number of rescues	36
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths o Environmental Exposure – Heat 9 o Skeletal Remains 0 o Water-Related 5 o Undetermined 2 o Other 0 o Motor Vehicle-Related 0 o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0 o Train-Related 0	16
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked

Big Bend Sector	
Number of searches	17
Number of rescues	44
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked
Number of deaths	2
o Environmental Exposure – Heat 0	
o Skeletal Remains 0	
o Water-Related 0	
o Undetermined 2	
o Other 0	
o Motor Vehicle-Related 0	
o Environmental Exposure – Cold 0	
o Train-Related 0	
Costs associated to identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased	Not Tracked
Grand Forks Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Swanton Sector¹	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Havre Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Miami Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
New Orleans Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Ramey Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Buffalo Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Houlton Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Detroit Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A
Spokane Sector	
None for FY 2016	N/A

¹ Swanton, Havre, Miami, New Orleans, Ramey, Buffalo, Houlton, Detroit, and Spokane sectors are all either coastal or northern border sectors, which do not have rescue beacons and/or no rescues were registered in these sectors in FY 2016. The appropriate data fields are thus marked “N/A.”

IV. Discussion

A. Methodology

Border-related deaths are tracked in the Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS), which USBP funds and manages. BSITS establishes a client-server database that serves as the central repository through web-based applications for collecting, managing, and disseminating critical incident data related to suspected, undocumented migrant deaths and Border Patrol rescues in selected counties along the U.S. border with Mexico. The data are used for analyzing the number and locations of deaths and rescues, categorizing deaths and rescues, identifying trends, and identifying high-risk areas. Key USBP field and headquarters planners also use the data in the budget planning process for allocating resources for border safety-related projects and measuring the effectiveness of other programs and projects.

A border-related death is defined as a suspected, undocumented migrant: 1) while in furtherance of an illegal entry; 2) within a designated target zone whether or not the Border Patrol was directly involved; and/or 3) outside the designated target zone when the Border Patrol has direct involvement with the incident.

Once the medical examiner/coroner determines the cause of death, a suspected cause of death is cited in BSITS and is categorized as:

- Environmental Exposure – Heat
- Environmental Exposure – Cold
- Motor Vehicle Accident
- Water
- Other

B. Identification of Deceased Individuals

USBP notifies law enforcement and the coroner's office within the jurisdiction of the located deceased individual. Local law enforcement conducts an appropriate death-related investigation and the county coroner assumes responsibility for the deceased. USBP contacts the coroner's office to request cause of death and identity determination. USBP contacts the consulate office of the deceased individual's native country for notification.

Tucson, Laredo, and Rio Grande Valley Sectors have established a full-time Missing Migrant Initiative (MMI), dedicating USBP personnel and resources to the identification, return/transfer, and notification of the deceased.

The MMI works with foreign consulates; other federal agencies; state, local, and tribal authorities; nongovernmental organizations; and families to locate and identify missing and suspected deceased undocumented aliens and to offer their families the opportunity to claim their remains. The MMI serves as an information clearinghouse for third-party reports of migrants

who are missing or deceased. The MMI is an outgrowth of the Border Safety Initiative, which seeks to save the lives of migrants when they find themselves in peril.

C. Costs Associated with Search and Rescue Efforts

USBP Special Operations Group, Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit (USBP SOG BORSTAR) allocates funding for Search and Rescue Operations (including training, equipment, and travel) annually and supports USBP sectors with search and rescue operations. For FY 2016, USBP SOG BORSTAR budgeted and expended \$1,584,215 in support of USBP search and rescue operations.

Currently, there is no system of record in place for USBP sectors to track costs associated with search and rescue efforts. USBP border security operational funding often is expended in support of search and rescue operations within proximity to the U.S. borders.

D. Costs Associated with the Identification, Return/Transfer, and Notification of Deceased

Currently, there is no formal mechanism in place for USBP sectors to track costs associated with the identification, return/transfer, and notification of deceased. USBP border security operational funding often is expended in the form of Border Patrol Agent work hours, salaries, benefits, and operational resources.

E. Reducing Border Crossings and Deaths in Remote Areas

USBP has several programs and initiatives focused on increasing border safety and minimizing the risk of migrant deaths.

USBP contains more than 246 BORSTAR Unit agents who are trained and certified for advanced search and rescue operations. BORSTAR agents are located strategically along the Southwest border and are on call and available to respond to high-risk emergent situations for extended periods.

USBP medical initiatives provide emergency medical response training to agents throughout the entire border region specifically focusing on high-risk areas. USBP currently has more than 1,200 certified Emergency Medical Technicians, as well as paramedics and first responders.

USBP is proactive in providing public awareness through communicating the dangers of crossing the Southwest border both within the United States and abroad. USBP complements the DHS media campaign plan to reach out to potential migrants in their home countries to discourage them from attempting to enter the United States illegally.

USBP also has 85 active rescue beacons strategically placed throughout the Southwest border, to save the lives of illegal aliens in distress.

V. Conclusion

CBP will continue to secure our Nation's borders at and between our ports of entry, and to provide robust search and rescue response capabilities to mitigate risk in remote and austere environments. CBP will continue to develop innovative ways to address these challenges with equipment and through policy and program implementation.

Appendix- List of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
BORSTAR	Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue
BSITS	Border Safety Initiative Tracking System
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FY	Fiscal Year
MMI	Missing Migrant Initiative
USBP	U.S. Border Patrol
USBP SOG BORSTAR	U.S. Border Patrol, Special Operations Group, Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit