

March 2000

# U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

## Better Planning, Coordination Needed to Handle Growing Commercial Traffic



G A O

Accountability \* Integrity \* Reliability



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**Abbreviations**

NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture



B-284127

March 3, 2000

The Honorable Henry Bonilla  
The Honorable Bob Filner  
The Honorable Ruben E. Hinojosa  
The Honorable Solomon P. Ortiz  
The Honorable Silvestre Reyes  
The Honorable Ciro D. Rodriguez  
House of Representatives

Trade between the United States and Mexico has more than doubled since the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect. Most of this trade crosses the border by truck, and in fiscal year 1998 there were nearly 4 million truck crossings into the United States from Mexico. In addition, an estimated 278 million-351 million people legally crossed the border from Mexico in fiscal year 1998, either as pedestrians or in 85-million passenger vehicles. The communities along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border have provided much of the necessary infrastructure—the roads and bridges—to facilitate truck shipments and the movement of people across the border.

You expressed concern that the border area was shouldering a disproportionate share of the costs of increased trade activity and that congestion problems related to expanded traffic were not being adequately addressed. As agreed with your offices, this report provides information and analysis on (1) the nature of commercial truck traffic congestion<sup>1</sup> at the southwest border; (2) the factors that contribute to congestion; and (3) the actions, including programs and funding, that are being taken to address these problems. This report provides a more in-depth analysis of the transportation infrastructure and inspection agency processes than was presented in our July 1999 report.<sup>2</sup> In addition, we are preparing another report that focuses on environmental infrastructure at the border.

Multiple U.S. government agencies carry out regulatory and enforcement activities along the border at the 25 border ports of entry that process

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<sup>1</sup>This report focuses on congestion related to commercial truck traffic, not commercial passenger or rail traffic.

<sup>2</sup>See *U.S.-Mexico Border: Issues and Challenges Confronting the United States and Mexico* (GAO/NSIAD-99-190, July 1, 1999).

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commercial vehicles. These activities are directed at assuring compliance with laws and standards regarding immigration, drugs, trade, and vehicle and product safety. The key inspection agencies are the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Department of Transportation. In addition, the General Services Administration oversees port of entry design, construction, and maintenance in consultation with the inspection agencies.

Our work focused on reviewing the binational processes associated with facilitating northbound commercial traffic entering the United States from Mexico. We conducted detailed case studies in six border communities, where we interviewed public and private sector representatives on both sides of the border. As part of these case studies, we visited 11 of the 25 ports of entry that handle commercial truck traffic across the border. We also reviewed studies related to cross-border transportation issues. In addition, we interviewed officials from federal, state, and local agencies as well as private sector organizations in the United States and Mexico. Appendix IV contains additional information on our objectives, scope, and methodology.

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## Results in Brief

Increased commercial truck traffic and the associated congestion at some border crossings, particularly older crossings that were built in downtown areas such as Laredo and El Paso, Texas, have taxed border community infrastructure. Lines of trucks—many of which are empty—waiting to enter the United States can run up to several miles during peak periods in the early to late afternoon, and the idling trucks contribute to air pollution and safety concerns in some major border cities. At the same time, crossings in remote and less accessible areas along the border such as Sasabe, Arizona, or Roma, Texas, are underutilized and less congested. According to U.S. Customs records, nearly 47 percent of the 3.6 million containers<sup>3</sup> that crossed the border in fiscal year 1998 from Mexico were empty. Government officials at the ports of entry must still process all trucks—empty or not—to ensure compliance with U.S. laws and regulations.

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<sup>3</sup>Customs data for 1998 show that in addition to the 3.6 million trucks with trailers, there were nearly 400,000 other commercial vehicles that crossed the border.

Commercial traffic congestion at the U.S.-Mexico border is primarily caused by the high volume of vehicles at ports of entry that must be processed through facilities that have physical and technological limitations and cumbersome practices. The specific factors that contribute to border congestion include (1) difficulties resulting from the multiple checks at the border by various federal and state agencies; (2) inspection agency staffing shortages at some border crossings; (3) limited use of automated management information systems for processing commercial traffic; (4) lack of land to expand port of entry operations; (5) inadequate roads leading to some ports of entry; and (6) poor port of entry planning among U.S. inspection agencies and limited coordination between the U.S. and Mexican governments.

Federal, state, and local governments as well as binational groups have responded to congestion at the border with a variety of initiatives. Some infrastructure improvements at ports of entry and roads leading to the border have been undertaken and funded by federal and state agencies, and others have been funded and are scheduled to occur in the year 2000 and beyond. In addition, federal agencies have undertaken initiatives to integrate their inspection processes for commercial traffic and test new technologies for expediting commercial traffic. Likewise, binational mechanisms to encourage dialogue and coordination have been created. Government, private sector, and academic studies have also been undertaken that identified infrastructure and staffing needs, as well as explored ways to mitigate congestion. However, because facilities planning and port of entry operations take place in a complex political and economic environment characterized by competing interests and differing development priorities, these efforts collectively have neither been able to keep up with the rapid increase in the volume of goods crossing the border nor to alleviate congestion.

This report offers specific recommendations to improve port of entry planning, enhance coordination with Mexico, and better coordinate and streamline U.S. inspection agencies' port of entry operations.

## Background

The border region, defined as a 100-kilometer band on both sides of the border, encompasses four U.S. states and six Mexican states, with about 6.2 million people in the United States and about 4.3 million in Mexico. Processing commercial trucks from Mexico into the United States involves various steps and requirements. These steps will vary from port to port depending upon size, location, amount of traffic handled, type of cargo, and port layout. Before shipments enter the United States from Mexico, Mexican customs brokers prepare documents and pay duties. The trucks must then go through Mexican Customs, where their documentation is checked. If the truck will be entering Texas, and thus passing over the Rio Grande River, the driver in most cases must pay a bridge toll before entering the United States. U.S. customs brokers also prepare paperwork for a truck to bring merchandise into the United States. When a truck proceeds into the United States, it must go to the primary booth (or directly to the inspection dock at some small ports of entry) at the U.S. port of entry, where Customs inspectors review documentation regarding the exporter, importer, and goods being transported.<sup>4</sup> If the truck's documentation is in order and no further inspections are required, the truck is allowed to pass through the port. Depending on the port of entry, goods imported, or law enforcement requirements, Customs may direct the truck to secondary inspections.

**Table 1: U.S. Inspection Agencies' Roles and Responsibilities Regarding Commercial Traffic at the Southwest Border**

Inspection agency	Role/responsibility
U.S. Customs Service	Ensure compliance with trade regulations and contraband/drug interdiction
Immigration and Naturalization Service	Has final authority on the admissibility of the driver
U.S. Department of Agriculture	Prevent introduction of plant and animal diseases and insect infestation
Food and Drug Administration	Ensure health and safety of products by testing product samples

Continued

<sup>4</sup>Customs also assists the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) at separate primary booths where pedestrians and passenger vehicles are processed. INS has a limited role in processing commercial vehicles, serving as the final authority on the admissibility of the driver.

Inspection agency	Role/responsibility
U.S. and state departments of transportation	Check safety of commercial trucks and buses
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Protect U.S. natural resources and prevent illegal importation of endangered species

Continued from Previous Page

Source: Agencies listed.

Trucks that require secondary inspection may be inspected by more than one of the following agencies: Customs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration, state and/or federal departments of transportation, and/or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is possible that one truck could be subject to six separate secondary inspections. Trucks are also subject to narcotics interdiction inspections while queued in front of the primary gates or in the compound for secondary inspections.

U.S. border states and local municipal planning organizations are responsible for constructing roads that lead to ports of entry and ensuring those roads connect with the state highway system. Ownership of ports of entry varies by state. In California, New Mexico, and Arizona, which have land crossings, the General Services Administration owns the port of entry facilities. In Texas, ports of entry can be privately owned and are leased by the General Services Administration, while the bridges over the Rio Grande River are owned by counties, private individuals, or corporations.

Cross-border trade between the United States and Mexico has been led by the development of the maquiladora, or export assembly, industry. Products from maquiladoras as well as fresh produce arrive at the border through five major Mexican highways. Figure 1 shows the U.S. ports of entry on the southwest border. (See app. I for a map of U.S. and Mexican highway corridors leading to the border and a discussion of U.S.-Mexico trade growth, and app. II for a profile of the 25 southwest border port of entry facilities that handle commercial traffic.)

Figure 1: U.S. Ports of Entry Along the Southwest Border



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of ports of entry in cities that have more than one. Not all southwest border ports of entry process commercial traffic.

Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Customs.

## The Nature of Commercial Traffic Congestion

Cross-border commercial traffic has taxed local transportation infrastructure at some ports of entry, resulting in lines of idling trucks—many of which are empty—that can run up to several miles in length during peak periods in the early to late afternoon. At the same time, other ports of entry are underutilized. Although little empirical data exist on the nature and extent of border congestion, delays at some ports of entry and the associated air pollution are major concerns for border residents, governments, and the private sector.

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## Congestion Varies at Ports of Entry

While some ports of entry process a high volume of commercial traffic, others are underutilized. According to Customs, approximately 91 percent of the nearly 4 million commercial truck crossings into the United States from Mexico in fiscal year 1998 took place at 7 of the 25 ports of entry that handle commercial traffic. The top seven ports of entry for fiscal year 1998, as classified by Customs' statistics, were Laredo, Otay Mesa, El Paso, Brownsville, Hidalgo, Nogales, and Calexico East (several of these ports have more than one bridge or crossing). At some ports of entry, such as the Juarez-Lincoln Bridge in Laredo, Texas, and Otay Mesa, California, there were as many as 2,500 commercial vehicle crossings in a day in that fiscal year. Other ports of entry located in rural and less accessible areas experienced lower traffic volume. For example, in fiscal year 1998, the port of entry at Roma, Texas, had just over 13,100 commercial vehicle crossings; nearby Rio Grande City, Texas, had about 18,700; and Sasabe, Arizona, only 1,800. (For information on commercial trucks processed at southwest border ports of entry, the number of full and empty containers, and containers examined, see table 4 in app. I.)

A large number of the trucks entering the United States from Mexico have empty containers. According to U.S. Customs records, nearly 47 percent of the 3.6 million containers that crossed the border in fiscal year 1998 from Mexico were empty. Current U.S. policy restricts the movement of trucks from Mexico to limited commercial zones generally 3 to 20 miles north of U.S. border cities. Some public and private officials have suggested that this policy contributes to the high volume of empty trucks at the border. This is because much of the cross-border traffic is handled by Mexican local firms that shuttle containers between warehouses within the commercial zones on both sides of the border.<sup>5</sup> Government officials at the ports of entry must still process all trucks—empty or not—to ensure compliance with U.S. laws and regulations.

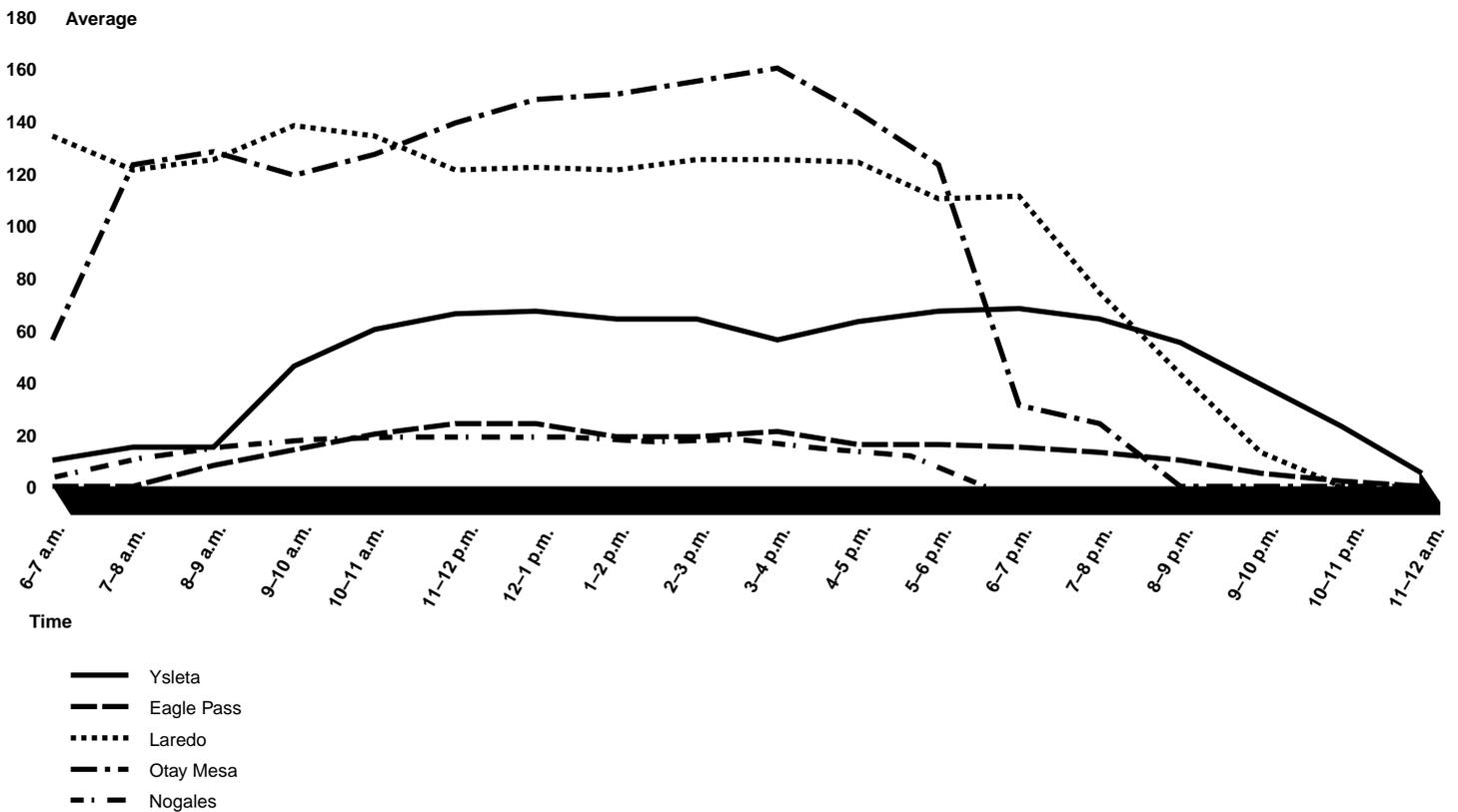
Port of entry usage can also vary by the time of day. Figure 2 presents data we collected from Customs' records on the hourly average number of trucks processed at five ports of entry that we visited. For the periods for which we had data, processing rates at these ports of entry varied from a peak of approximately 160 commercial trucks an hour at Otay Mesa, California, to a relatively constant 120 commercial vehicles an hour at the

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<sup>5</sup>Mexican firms own these vehicles. U.S. trucks, empty or loaded, are officially prohibited from entering Mexico, according to Department of Transportation officials, but do so at some crossings under local sister-city agreements.

Lincoln-Juarez Bridge in Laredo, Texas. At the Ysleta port of entry in El Paso, Texas, the data showed the volume of trucks processed to be about 60-70 trucks an hour from mid-morning to 8:00 p.m.

Figure 2: Hourly Average of Northbound Trucks Processed at Five U.S. Ports of Entry



Note: This illustrative information was derived from available Customs' port of entry hourly processing figures. Data for the Ysleta port of entry, in El Paso, Texas, and Otay Mesa, California, are for fiscal year 1998. Data for the Lincoln-Juarez bridge in Laredo, Texas, were collected by Customs during a 2-week period in January 1999; information for the Mariposa port of entry in Nogales, Arizona, is for parts of five different months in fiscal year 1998; and data for Eagle Pass, Texas, represent activity during October-November 1998 as well as July and December 1997.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs data.

At the ports of entry close to large maquiladora production centers such as the Ysleta port of entry at El Paso, Texas, and Otay Mesa, California, private sector representatives told us that one factor that contributes to the variability of traffic is maquiladora shipping and production practices. They

noted that maquiladoras generally operate on a just-in-time basis and fill orders that often arrive in the mornings and ship later in the day. Customs officials noted that commercial traffic at heavily used ports of entry is usually higher during the afternoon than the mornings, leading to longer peak wait times. These representatives also noted that congestion can affect just-in-time delivery schedules.

Although Customs has conducted limited empirical research on delays at ports of entry, Customs officials, in response to industry criticism, said that with the exception of one commercial crossing in El Paso, Texas, views of Customs and the private sector on the scope of the problem vary. Customs officials said they have worked with the private sector to spread traffic over the time a port of entry is open, but that problems persist.

Examples of delays and congestion at the border include the following:

- Trucking association representatives in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, said that truck drivers using the heavily traveled Lincoln-Juarez Bridge average 3 hours waiting to get into the United States from Mexico. The Customs port director in Laredo, Texas, said the standard wait time at the Lincoln-Juarez Bridge is 2 hours, but he emphasized that there is a constant flow of commercial trucks from 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. (Fig. 3 shows trucks in the U.S. import lot in Laredo; the trucks on the bridge are heading into Mexico.)

Figure 3: Commercial Traffic in Laredo, Texas



Source: GAO.

- At Otay Mesa, California, trucking representatives told us that delays in crossing the border could run to 2 to 3 hours, depending on the season. Customs port of entry officials noted that a 1998 internal study conducted over a 9-day period found that the average wait time to enter the port was 1 hour, with a peak wait time of 76 minutes between 5:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. The study did not include data on the time it took for the trucks to be processed through the port.
- At Nogales, Arizona, which handles 60 to 70 percent of all winter produce consumed in the United States and Canada, private sector representatives said that during the peak season of January to April, delays can reach 2 to 3 hours. Customs officials at Nogales did not have

information on how long a truck may wait in line outside the port of entry during peak season. The Customs cargo chief at Nogales said that during the peak season, when there may be as many as 1,300 truck crossings a day at the port of entry, she considers 45 minutes to be an acceptable processing time once a vehicle enters the port of entry. Because many of the shipments processed at Nogales involve agricultural goods, these shipments may also be subject to inspection by the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Food and Drug Administration.

- At El Paso, Texas, the delays experienced by commercial trucks at the Ysleta crossing regularly average 2 to 3 hours during peak hours, according to maquiladora and trucking representatives who use the bridge on a daily basis. Customs port officials we interviewed at El Paso did not have information on average wait times but noted that queuing to enter the Ysleta crossing begins at about 10:30 a.m. and backups can reach several miles during peak periods.

Delays are less common at ports of entry that handle smaller volumes of commercial traffic. For instance, in Roma, Texas, the volume of traffic is so low that trucks go directly into the inspection compound without having to wait in line. In addition, Customs officials at the lightly used Santa Teresa, New Mexico, port of entry said that they virtually never have a traffic delay. Further, the wait time at the Colombia Bridge, located near Laredo, Texas, is 20 minutes or less, according to the U.S. Customs port director.

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## Border Communities' and Private Sector Concerns About Congestion

Border residents, governments, and the private sector have expressed concerns about congestion and delays at some ports of entry. Due in part to pollution from trucks waiting to cross the border, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency concluded in 1997 that the air quality in El Paso, Texas, did not meet federal clean air standards. Other work by researchers at San Diego State University found that emissions from heavy trucks involved in cross-border traffic contributed to elevated levels of particulate matter (liquid or solid particles present in the air), ozone, and carbon monoxide in the San Diego/Tijuana area. Congestion leading to and from ports of entry can also create a public safety hazard for local traffic and pedestrians. In addition, congestion and delays can have a potential impact on firms that operate on a just-in-time schedule and rely on parts, supplies, and finished goods to be shipped and processed quickly across the border.

## Factors That Contribute to Congestion at the Border

Many U.S. ports of entry have had long-standing problems handling commercial traffic at the U.S.-Mexico border, particularly since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect in 1994.<sup>6</sup> Six primary factors have contributed to congestion at the border. They are multiple inspection requirements, difficult staffing and human resource problems, limited use of automated management information systems for processing commercial traffic, insufficient inspection space, inadequate roads connecting to ports of entry, and limited coordination and planning among U.S. inspection agencies and between the United States and Mexico.

## Multiple Inspections and Checks by Various Agencies

Because many federal agencies have statutory authority to conduct various types of inspections at the border, commercial trucks may undergo more than one inspection. The process starts with the primary inspection, which is mandatory and is conducted by Customs, usually at the entry to the U.S. inspection compound. While waiting to enter the compound, trucks are often checked for narcotics by inspectors who conduct vehicle examinations with hand-held density meters,<sup>7</sup> tools, and canines. Depending on the outcome of these inspections, trucks may be selected for “secondary” inspections where cargo is unloaded onto a dock or, at some ports of entry, the entire truck is X-rayed. Secondary inspections may be conducted by Customs inspectors looking for compliance with trade laws and regulations or narcotics violations, by federal and state departments of transportation, by the Department of Agriculture, by the Food and Drug Administration, and by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. With the exception of safety inspections conducted by federal and state departments of transportation, these multiple inspections and checks can sometimes result in cargo being unloaded twice for examination by different agencies, according to inspection agency staff and private sector representatives. Empty trucks would likely only be inspected by transportation officials to ensure safety or by Customs. Multiple inspections contribute to congestion within the ports of entry and delays of shipments. (Fig. 4 shows inspection activities being conducted at ports of entry.)

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of problems at southwest border ports of entry prior to NAFTA, see *U.S.-Mexico Trade: Survey of U.S. Border Infrastructure Needs* (GAO/NSIAD-92-56, Nov. 27, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Density meters are used to check a vehicle or merchandise for hidden compartments containing contraband.

Figure 4: Inspection Activities at Southwest Border Ports of Entry



U.S. Customs inspector performing canine exam in Roma, Texas.



Truck X-ray in Pharr, Texas.



Department of Agriculture inspection in Rio Grande City, Texas.

Source: GAO.

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Although data are not available on the number of multiple inspections conducted, at the seven ports of entry that handle the largest volume of commercial traffic, 14 to 47 percent of commercial vehicles were subjected to a detailed narcotics examination by U.S. Customs in fiscal year 1998. Overall, in fiscal year 1998, Customs conducted narcotics inspections on about 12 percent of the loaded truck containers entering the United States at the southwest border.<sup>8</sup>

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### Staffing Shortages and Human Resource Management Issues

At some ports of entry, staffing constraints impede the flow of commercial vehicles. Customs officials in Washington, D.C., and at each of the ports of entry we visited told us that their staffing levels are often too low for them to keep all primary inspection lanes open. For example, at the ports of entry at Laredo, Texas, Customs officials told us in May 1999 that there were 37 inspector vacancies that needed to be filled. (See app. III for a discussion of Customs' staffing levels.) The lack of staff resources is attributed in part by Customs officials to high employee turnover rates at the southwest border. Reasons given for high turnover rates include working conditions at the border (for example, high temperatures and heavy workload associated with processing large volumes of commercial and passenger traffic).

Customs port officials also must consider other human resource management issues when dealing with staffing of ports. Customs has local contractual agreements with the National Treasury Employees Union, which represents Customs inspectors, that contain agreed-upon "minimal" staffing levels for port of entry operations. Basically, under the contract, a primary lane must be closed unless there is an agreed-upon number of backup staff to examine a vehicle targeted for a secondary inspection or to process and review paperwork for compliance with trade regulations. At some ports of entry, National Guard troops assist Customs by conducting secondary cargo inspections. According to Customs officials we interviewed in Washington, D.C., approximately 300 National Guard troops work with Customs at the southwest border, mainly assisting with secondary inspections of trucks and passenger vehicles. (See fig. 5 for a

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<sup>8</sup>These Customs narcotics examinations are referred to as "six point" inspections. These inspections consist of a canine exam; a search of the interior and engine compartment of the tractor; and an examination of the trailer walls, ceiling, and floor. Inspectors also check the fuel and air tanks, the tires, and the fifth wheel, or king-plate area.

photograph of National Guard troops operating a mobile truck X-ray in Laredo, Texas.)

Figure 5: National Guard Troops X-raying a Truck in Laredo, Texas



Source: GAO.

According to Customs managers, meeting minimum staffing requirements can lead to human resource management challenges. Although inspectors may be needed for just a few hours to meet peak traffic demand, port managers would have to bring the inspector in and pay him/her for an extra shift. This can lead to increased overtime costs, which Customs managers say they are required to monitor closely so that an inspector's overtime "cap" is not exceeded.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Customs officials told us that overtime is an important source of income for inspectors. The amount U.S. Customs inspectors can earn from overtime is currently capped at \$30,000 a year.

Customs' staffing shortages and management of human resources have been long-standing issues, both at the national level and at the southwest border.<sup>10</sup> In 1998, we recommended that Customs establish a systematic process to ensure, to the extent possible, that Customs' inspection personnel are properly aligned with its goals, objectives, and strategies, including those for drug enforcement.<sup>11</sup> Customs has not yet finalized the staffing model being developed to respond to this recommendation. (App. III provides additional information on Customs' staffing trends.)

Staff shortages are also a concern of the other federal inspection agencies. Food and Drug Administration and U.S. Department of Agriculture officials said that although their staffing levels had increased recently, they have staff shortages at some crossings. For example, the Food and Drug Administration, with 37 staff at the southwest border, reported staffing shortages at the Laredo, Texas, port of entry. While the Department of Agriculture has 257 staff at the southwest border, the Agriculture port director in Laredo, Texas, said that he needed 10 additional staff. The Department of Transportation has 40 inspectors working along the southwest border. A December 1998 report issued by the Department of Transportation's Inspector General estimated that a minimum presence at the southwest border would require about 73 inspectors to ensure that the commercial ports of entry were covered by at least 2 inspectors for each work shift.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See *U.S.-Mexico Trade: Survey of U.S. Border Infrastructure Needs* (GAO/NSIAD-92-56, Nov. 27, 1991).

<sup>11</sup>See *Customs Service: Process for Estimating and Allocating Personnel* (GAO/GGD-98-107, Apr. 30, 1998).

<sup>12</sup>*Motor Carrier Safety Program for Commercial Trucks at U.S. Borders* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Transportation, Office of the Inspector General, 1998).

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## Federal Agencies Make Limited Use of Automated Systems to Process Commercial Vehicles

Most of the processes used by U.S. inspection agencies at the southwest border still involve moving paper by hand from agency to agency within the federal inspection compound. For example, a bill of lading (or “manifest”) is first reviewed at the primary booth located at the entrance to the port of entry and then carried by hand to Customs or other inspection agency staff inside the compound for further scrutiny. If a shipment has been selected for an agricultural inspection, the papers are hand-carried to Department of Agriculture officials. According to officials working at the ports of entry, this has an adverse impact on port of entry operations because truck drivers are often forced to park their vehicles and wait for paperwork, causing congestion inside the compound or at the secondary inspection docks.<sup>13</sup>

Customs port officials said that they have been looking to technology as a way to facilitate truck inspections. For example, truck X-rays have been used to reduce the time required for inspections. Customs inspectors told us that a whole truck and its contents can be checked in about 10 minutes—versus the time it might take to unload, inspect, and reload the truck. According to Customs officials working at the border, other types of technology, such as automated license plate readers, are projected to be deployed more widely in the coming years. These readers will permit information to be collected by machine rather than entered manually, saving inspectors time at the primary booth.

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## Space Limitations

Space limitations at 11 ports of entry we visited also contribute to problems in handling commercial traffic. Because four of these ports of entry lack adequate dock space to conduct inspections, trucks have to park inside the compound and wait until space becomes available. This adds to congestion within ports of entry. At other locations, space is not always available for trucks to maneuver or back up to docks. In addition, five of the facilities we visited have no or limited room to expand, which will stress the infrastructure even more if cross-border trade continues to increase as projected. (See table 2 for a summary of space limitations at ports of entry we visited.) Further, many ports of entry were built when there were fewer agency demands for inspection space and before new technologies, such as

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<sup>13</sup>The Food and Drug Administration uses an electronic processing system to manage entry of products under its jurisdiction. This system, called the “Operational and Administrative System for Import Support,” has an interface with Customs’ Automated Commercial System and is used to retrieve import information and screen entries.

whole truck X-rays, were deployed. For example, there is limited space for Department of Transportation truck safety inspections at crossings in Texas and Arizona. A related limitation is the lack of lanes for trucks to enter and exit inspection facilities. At Otay Mesa, for example, one of the exit lanes cannot be used because the turning radius is too narrow to permit tractor trailers to exit the facility. (See fig. 6 for a picture of the exit lane.)

**Table 2: U.S. Ports of Entry at the Southwest Border Encountering Space and Other Limitations**

Port of entry	Limited room to expand	Lack of docking space	Inadequate area to park trucks	Limited room to deploy new technology	Poor port of entry road connections	Inadequate exits
Rio Grande City Bridge, Tex. <sup>a</sup>		X	X	X		
Roma Bridge, Tex.	X	X	X	X	X	X
Juarez-Lincoln Bridge, Laredo, Tex. <sup>a</sup>	X		X	X		X
Colombia Bridge, Laredo, Tex.					X	
Eagle Pass II Bridge, Tex.					X	
Ysleta Bridge, El Paso, Tex.			X		X	X
Bridge of the Americas, El Paso, Tex.	X				X	X
Santa Teresa, N.Mex.					X	
Nogales West, Ariz.	X	X				
Tecate, Calif. <sup>b</sup>		X	X	X	X	
Otay Mesa, Calif.	X				X	X

<sup>a</sup> New facility under construction.

<sup>b</sup> Construction of an expanded facility is scheduled for fiscal year 2001.

Source: GAO analysis.

**Figure 6: Blocked Truck Exit Lane at Otay Mesa, California**

Source: GAO.

In a 1999 document, Customs noted that it plans to spend approximately \$200 million over the next 5 years on the southwest border for what it terms new “applied” technology to improve processing and inspection capabilities. It is questionable if there is adequate space to accommodate the new equipment at all ports of entry, according to General Services Administration officials. At ports of entry that process larger traffic volumes, particularly those in crowded downtown locations, there is no room to expand operations. New technology requiring adequate space includes mobile and fixed truck or cargo X-rays and contraband destruction systems.

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## Problems With Roads Leading to Ports of Entry

Problems with roads leading to and from some ports of entry—including limited lanes and poor road conditions—in both the United States and Mexico contribute to local congestion and bottlenecks of traffic destined for major highway corridors (see fig. 9 in app. I). Some of these problems are linked to the location of older ports of entry, which are in crowded downtown locations. In other communities, some new ports of entry do not yet have connecting roads with more than two lanes, both in the United States as well as in Mexico. According to public and private sector officials, the type and quality of roads influence how frequently commercial traffic uses them. A recent binational study published by the Joint Working Committee<sup>14</sup> quantified costs associated with trade-related traffic between the United States and Mexico. The study estimated that repair costs due to wear on the U.S. border state highway systems were \$113 million in 1995, while wear on U.S. nonborder highway systems was estimated at \$62 million. Problems with access roads leading to ports of entry can be seen in the type of projects on the drawing board in border communities.

- El Paso, Texas, has plans for 22 projects estimated to cost about \$379 million. Two involve a \$140-million border highway extension east and west to connect El Paso's four ports of entry to Interstate 10. A proposed \$23 million project would help move traffic from the Bridge of the Americas port of entry to a loop road around the city.
- Laredo, Texas, has \$464 million in proposed projects. One unfunded project, estimated to cost \$125 million, would link the Laredo IV port of entry into an Interstate 35 interchange and Loop 20. Another proposed \$10 million–\$15 million improvement would expand to six lanes the road leading to the Colombia Bridge.
- Eagle Pass, Texas, where a new port of entry opened in September 1999, has plans for a road to connect the new port of entry to U.S. highway 57. This proposed project is estimated to cost \$18 million, with an additional \$3 million required to change local truck routes.

Infrastructure connecting ports of entry to main highways is also a problem in some Mexican communities. The road leading to the Colombia Bridge port of entry from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, is narrow, making

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<sup>14</sup>The Joint Working Committee is a binational group with representatives from the U.S. and Mexican border states, both nations' federal transportation departments, and the U.S. State Department and the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Relations. The Joint Working Committee's *Binational Border Transportation Planning and Programming Study* was published in 1998.

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the trip dangerous for large trucks, according to private sector representatives. Moreover, all hazardous materials that cross into Laredo are required to use the Colombia Bridge because it is less congested than the existing downtown bridge.

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**Limited Coordination and Planning Among U.S. Inspection Agencies and Between the U.S. and Mexican Governments**

Limited coordination of facility planning among U.S. federal inspection agencies also contributes to congestion at ports of entry. For example, not all the inspection agencies with responsibilities at the border have participated in formal interagency facility planning meetings held by the Border Station Partnership Council—although that appears to be changing. A related problem with facility planning is that inspection agencies have not developed empirical data on the type and nature of bottlenecks at ports of entry. Such data would permit port of entry improvements to be based on data and targeted at specific problems. There are also problems with coordinating operations between the U.S. and Mexican governments. These focus on port of entry hours of operation and Mexican bank hours, both of which influence cross-border traffic patterns and congestion.

**Coordination and Facility Planning Problems Among Federal Inspection Agencies**

Bottlenecks at ports of entry are linked in part to limited coordination and poor planning on the part of federal inspection agencies that use these facilities. Recent federal efforts to address these issues through interagency mechanisms have been hindered by the lack of participation by all relevant agencies and limited data on the nature and scope of congestion and infrastructure problems at individual ports of entry.

In 1998 the General Services Administration established the Border Station Center of Expertise to oversee the planning and design of new facilities as well as the improvement of existing ones. The Center works with the Border Station Partnership Council,<sup>15</sup> which includes three of the five federal inspection agencies at the border: Customs, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Department of Transportation had not been involved in these meetings because the agency believes it has a temporary role that will end when all of the border states establish inspection facilities (California has its own truck inspection facilities). The Food and Drug Administration said that it had participated in other planning meetings but not those of the Partnership Council. The Department of Transportation and the Food and Drug Administration began attending these interagency port facility planning meetings in December 1999.<sup>16</sup> These agencies' continued involvement is important because port of entry facility planning requires coordinated analyses of how potential changes in traffic patterns or inspection activities may influence operations.

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<sup>15</sup>The Border Station Partnership Council was established in 1997 under a memorandum of understanding among the General Services Administration, Customs, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Department of Agriculture. Its goal is to ensure that the planning, design, construction, and operation of border station facilities are done in a cooperative and cost-effective manner.

<sup>16</sup>In a 1997 report, we recommended that the Department of Transportation work actively with the General Services Administration to ensure that truck safety inspection facilities are included, where practicable, when border installations are planned, constructed, or refurbished. See *Commercial Trucking: Safety Concerns About Mexican Trucks Remain Even as Inspection Activity Increases* (GAO/RCED-97-68, Apr. 9, 1997).

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Although Customs and INS are active participants in interagency efforts and have agreed to coordinate port of entry planning, each agency uses different contractors to model facility improvements using separate computer software. INS focuses on vehicle occupants and pedestrians, whereas Customs focuses on commercial vehicle traffic. This “stovepipe” approach to facility management is an impediment to more integrated port of entry planning because specific inspection components are viewed in isolation. The adverse consequence for port of entry operations is that potential benefits from more streamlined and coordinated inspection facilities may not be realized.<sup>17</sup>

Even though there have been efforts to improve interagency coordination, the Border Station Partnership Council agencies have not conducted in-depth analyses of existing equipment and resources at individual ports of entry. Without such information, it is difficult for the General Services Administration to ascertain the extent to which specific problems, such as space limitations or limited access or exit lanes, currently exist at ports of entry. It also makes it difficult to determine how projected changes, such as \$200 million in new technology scheduled to be deployed by Customs, can be accommodated at existing facilities.

An issue related to interagency port of entry planning is the lack of reliable information on the nature and type of congestion problems. There is very little official data regarding the amount of time trucks spend waiting to enter U.S. ports and the time it takes to move through the inspection process. Moreover, there are no broadly accepted standards as to what is a reasonable amount of time for commercial vehicles to cross the border into the United States.<sup>18</sup> The lack of data on delays and processing times makes it difficult to accurately assess bottlenecks within compounds. It also makes it difficult to identify where and how processes could be streamlined or synergies achieved among inspection agencies. Such

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<sup>17</sup>In December 1999, Customs, the General Services Administration, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Department of Transportation agreed to undertake a joint initiative to develop simulation software to evaluate the effectiveness of a variety of physical and operating improvements to border crossings and the roads leading to them.

<sup>18</sup>Customs, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have established a 20-minute wait time goal for passenger vehicles entering the United States from Mexico. In discussions we had with private sector representatives on both sides of the border, they told us that they do not question the need for commercial vehicle inspections and believe it is possible to arrive at an acceptable processing time or standard.

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information could be used by Customs and other inspection agencies in conjunction with data on staffing levels, technology utilized for inspections, and vehicles lanes opened to develop estimates of port processing capabilities under different conditions.

### Coordination With Mexico on Port Operations Is Limited

While there are forums where U.S. and Mexican federal agencies coordinate efforts at the local and national level, coordination between the U.S. and Mexican governments on key port of entry business operations is limited at some ports of entry. This can influence the efficient processing of traffic and can lead to congestion because trucks may be processed through one country's facilities but then must wait to clear Customs and inspections on the other side. For example, Mexican Customs' duties must be paid prior to a truck leaving Mexico. At ports of entry such as Nuevo Laredo and Nogales, Mexico, U.S. officials told us that Mexican banks that are authorized to accept payments on behalf of Mexican Customs open later than the U.S. and Mexican ports of entry. This difference between banks' and Customs' opening hours causes trucks to delay leaving Mexico in the early morning and thus contributes to congestion later in the day. It also means that U.S. inspectors may be relatively underutilized at some ports of entry in the early morning hours.

An additional problem identified by U.S. Customs officials is that Mexican port of entry authorities sometimes release trucks in batches, causing uneven traffic flows. Mexican officials told us that this situation is a function of how shipments are classified in their management information system. For instance, a shipment may be spread over many trucks yet be classified in the Mexican system as one unit. Once this "unit" of trucks is processed by Mexican Customs, the trucks are released as a group.

The situation at the Nogales, Arizona, crossing also demonstrates problems in coordination of port operations between the U.S. and Mexican governments. At this crossing, U.S. Customs brokers' (who process Customs' paperwork for shippers) practices contribute to bottlenecks at the border.<sup>19</sup> According to Mexican and U.S. Customs officials, brokers have space available that they could rent at the entrance to a 9-kilometer Mexican toll road leading to the border but choose instead to have their

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<sup>19</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation officials told us that they believe that Mexican customs brokers' practices also contribute to congestion at the border. These officials linked this to Mexican legal requirements that these brokers process all cross-border cargo, resulting in multiple moves between warehouses on both sides of the border.

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staff stationed just across the border on the Mexican side. Brokers do this to save the cost of renting space and to be closer to the border. As a result, truck drivers queue up just across the border with Mexico while they wait for their paperwork, as seen in the photographs in figure 7. This situation provides an example of how better government-to-government coordination could help to address what is essentially a local problem.

Figure 7: Customs Brokers at the Nogales, Arizona, Commercial Port of Entry



Customs brokers sort through forms when trucks arrive at the border.



Customs brokers delivering documents to drivers before the truck crosses into the United States.

Source: GAO.

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## Actions Underway to Address Congestion Problems

Both U.S. and Mexican authorities recognize that handling commercial traffic congestion is of increasing importance and have taken steps to make improvements. Federal and state funds have been targeted for port of entry facilities and road enhancements. For example, since 1988 about \$341 million in federal funds have been spent to build or improve southwest border ports of entry. In addition, from 1994 through 1998, about \$3.1 billion in state and federal funding was designated by states for road construction and improvements in the U.S. counties that border Mexico. Coordination efforts are also underway at U.S. ports of entry, technological innovations have been attempted, and forums for binational dialogue have been established.

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## Expenditures on Border-related Improvements

Since fiscal year 1988, about \$341 million has been used by the General Services Administration to erect new port of entry facilities and improve existing ones. About \$157 million of these funds were used to build new ports of entry: \$82 million in California for two new facilities; \$52 million for three new Texas facilities; and \$10 million for one New Mexico facility. A port of entry station at Tecate, California, for which \$13 million was designated, remains to be constructed. The remaining \$184 million was spent to improve existing ports of entry. Improvements included station expansions, safety enhancements, and administrative office space renovations or additions. (App. II provides more details on these improvements.) A new port of entry and bridge not included in this initiative are being built in Laredo, Texas, and are scheduled to open in April 2000. This will permit commercial traffic to be routed around downtown Laredo/Nuevo Laredo.

In 1998, Congress authorized funding for high-priority corridors and border projects for fiscal years 1999 through 2003.<sup>20</sup> In May 1999, the Secretary of Transportation granted four southwest border states about \$31 million, mainly for border-related road and port of entry projects. Arizona received \$5.5 million (to develop a commercial vehicle inspection station), California was granted \$7.7 million (to study a new border crossing near Mexicali and other road improvements), New Mexico was awarded \$4 million (to widen a border area highway from two to four lanes), and Texas was awarded \$14 million for several projects.

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<sup>20</sup>Public Law 105-178, secs. 1101, 1118-19. Section 1119 authorizes the Coordinated Border Infrastructure Program.

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In addition to the improvements made to port of entry facilities, states used federal and state monies to build or upgrade roads in the border region (states, not the federal government, generally choose and prioritize highway projects). Between fiscal year 1994 and 1998, a total of about \$3.1 billion in state and federal funding was designated by states for a range of construction activities along the border. Due to limitations in state data, it is not possible to determine if these expenditures are directly related to roads leading to ports of entry or major highway corridors. Texas, which has 23 counties in the 100-kilometer region on the U.S. side of the border, programmed about \$1.2 billion; California, with 2 counties in the border region, programmed about \$1.25 billion; Arizona, which has 4 counties in the border region, programmed about \$320 million; and New Mexico, with 4 counties in the border region, programmed about \$361 million. (See app. II for further information on state infrastructure funding along the southwest border.)

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## Port of Entry Coordination Efforts

Many groups have called for improved coordination among federal and state inspection agencies working at ports of entry. In 1998, Customs and the Immigration and Naturalization Service instituted the Border Coordination Initiative to create a comprehensive, integrated border management system that effectively achieves the mission of each agency. Other agencies working at the ports of entry, or supporting the ports of entry, are generally not represented at the Border Coordination Initiative meetings. This is because the Border Coordination Initiative has focused on narcotics interdiction issues. Another initiative intended to address port of entry coordination problems was the Port Quality Improvement Committees, which began in 1996 at five southwest border locations and one on the northern border. The Port Quality Improvement Committees grew out of the National Performance Review and were intended to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and cycle times for travelers (not commercial traffic) through integrated inspections. We found that these types of coordinating mechanisms are operating at the ports of entry where we conducted case studies (see app. IV for a listing of these ports of entry).

Other actions taken to improve the flow of commercial traffic and enhance coordination include the “superbooths” used at the Nogales, Arizona, port of entry. These booths are located at the primary inspection point, and state officials, who collect truck permit fees, share them with Customs inspectors so that trucks do not need to enter the inspection compound for permits as they did previously. This idea stemmed from a 1997 Arizona

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Department of Transportation study. (See fig. 8 for a photograph of a superbooth at the Nogales, Arizona, port of entry.)

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**Figure 8: “Superbooth” at the Nogales, Arizona, Port of Entry**



Source: GAO.

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## Technology Pilot Projects

In terms of efforts to use technology to expedite border crossings, Customs conducted a pilot project in 1997-98 of the North American Trade Automation Prototype. This prototype was conducted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico to assess the potential to harmonize trade processes and develop and share common data using internet-based communications—in other words, a paperless process to clear each nation’s Customs at the border. The prototype also utilized intelligent transportation systems, such as transponder/radio frequency identification devices in trucks, to provide advance information to Customs officials at the border. Mexican Customs officials and private sector representatives in Nogales, Arizona, one of two southwest border test sites (the other was Otay Mesa, California), expressed considerable interest in the prototype. The prototype is cited in the 1998 evaluation done by Canadian Customs, Mexican Customs, and a private contractor working on behalf of the U.S. Department of the Treasury as an example of how technology can speed up and improve processing at the border. According to Customs officials,

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lessons learned from the prototype were being applied to a test project called the "National Customs Automation Program." The automation program was tested at three ports of entry, one of which is on the southwest border (Laredo, Texas), to process automobile and auto part imports for four companies.

Customs is currently employing the Automated Targeting System at five southwest border locations. This system employs technology that is to facilitate identifying potential problem shipments before they arrive at a port of entry and expediting the processing of those vehicles believed to pose less of a risk. Customs officials are currently compiling summary statistics on this system, and a final report is expected by July 2000. Another Customs effort aimed at expediting shipments is the Border Release Advanced Screening and Selectivity System program. This program is designed to expedite cargo shipments of companies such as large maquiladoras that regularly use crossings more than 50 times a year and employ the same driver and truck. Precertified companies and drivers are not required to stop inside the port to process paperwork. Such shipments only involve about 10 percent of the truck traffic entering the country from Mexico (50 percent of the trucks that cross the U.S.-Canada border use this program as well).

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## Binational Dialogue

To meet the transnational challenge of improving the flow of goods and services across the border, the United States and Mexico are pursuing a number of joint efforts.

The U.S. and Mexican governments have created several binational institutions to foster joint action at the local, state/regional, and federal levels. At the local level, the Border Liaison Mechanism, which was developed by the U.S. State Department and Mexico's Secretariat of Foreign Relations, is chaired by the consuls-general or consuls in the sister or pair cities. It brings together U.S. and Mexican officials at the federal, state, and municipal levels as well as business and community groups in order to develop joint actions to help resolve problems locally rather than in Washington or Mexico City. Border Liaison Mechanisms work on cross-border law enforcement issues, coordination of port security and operations, immigration concerns, economic development, health care, and environmental protection.

The binational Joint Working Committee works on transportation planning at the local and national levels, with representatives from U.S. and Mexican

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states and federal governments. This group was formed in April 1994 when the U.S. and Mexican Secretaries of Transportation signed a memorandum of understanding to coordinate planning and programming efforts of intermodal transportation projects along the border. As a result of this agreement, the Joint Working Committee completed a Binational Planning and Programming Study in 1998 that investigated U.S. and Mexican transportation planning processes and reviewed available data on border transportation infrastructure and goods movement. The study concluded that better coordination of the various binational transportation planning and programming processes is needed. According to various committee participants, this would require a new memorandum of understanding.

At the state/regional level, the Border Governors' Conference, which represents the four U.S. and six Mexican border states, provides a forum where state officials can meet to discuss issues and opportunities along the border region and promote initiatives to improve the region's quality of life.<sup>21</sup> The Western Governors' Association also works on issues that affect the western U.S. states. The Western Governors' Association has undertaken studies of issues that directly influence the four U.S. border states. For example, in 1999 it released a report on congestion and air pollution at major southwest border crossings. Among other things, the report concluded that insufficient staff contributes to delays at the border.<sup>22</sup>

At the federal level, the U.S.–Mexico Binational Group on Bridges and Border Crossings works out agreements for existing and potential bridges and border crossings and is coordinated by the U.S. State Department and its Mexican counterpart. The Binational Commission meets annually at the Cabinet level and works on a wide range of issues, such as transportation, drugs, immigration, and border cooperation, that are critical to U.S.–Mexico relations and the border region. The General Services Administration and its Mexican counterpart, the Comision de Avaluos de Bienes Nacionales, have also begun holding semiannual meetings where port of entry plans for the entire southwest border are discussed. Mexican officials told us that they have established priorities and developed a plan

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<sup>21</sup>According to the State Department, the Joint Working Committee, in response to a 1999 request from the Border Governors' Conference, has agreed to take the lead in conducting a study of ways of improving port management on the southwest border.

<sup>22</sup>See *Border Congestion Study*, prepared for the Western Governor's Association by Parsons Transportation Group and Suma Sinergia (Denver, CO: 1999).

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for their northern border ports of entry that examines ports of entry as part of an integrated transportation system.

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## Conclusions

Despite the overall U.S. and Mexican policy of achieving closer economic integration, no clear strategy exists to ensure that the infrastructure and processes are in place to support this objective. Although cross-border commercial truck traffic congestion is not uniform across all southwest border ports of entry, transportation bottlenecks are a significant problem at some crossings. Among other things, long lines of trucks have raised public safety issues for pedestrians and air pollution concerns for border residents. A number of factors contribute to congestion, particularly inadequate coordination among federal inspection agencies and with their Mexican counterparts as well as insufficient port of entry planning. Although the United States and Mexico have taken steps—sometimes jointly—to mitigate congestion, additional actions are needed to improve the flow of U.S.-Mexico trade and the quality of life for residents along the border. This is especially important given the dramatic recent increase in the volume of commercial trucks crossing the border as well as the projected future growth.

Addressing congestion will require actions to improve coordination among federal agencies' inspections and better port of entry facility planning. It will also require federal agency coordination with the Mexican government on hours of operation at ports of entry as well as the private sector to spread traffic more evenly throughout the day. Greater attention to port of entry facility planning would also help to address congestion at the border. For example, collecting and analyzing information on existing equipment and resources at ports of entry would ensure that technology scheduled to be deployed fits into existing compounds and is optimally utilized. The lack of empirical data on wait times and traffic delays at and leading to ports of entry also impedes inspection agency efforts to more effectively plan and target resources to alleviate congestion. In addition, assessing infrastructure requirements leading to U.S. and Mexican border ports of entry by U.S. and Mexican agencies would allow for more integrated port of entry and transportation corridor planning.

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## Recommendations

To improve coordination of port of entry operations, we recommend that the Commissioner of Customs serve as the lead and work with the Secretaries of Transportation and Agriculture, the Administrator of the

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General Services Administration, the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Commissioner of Food and Drugs to develop and implement a plan for coordinating commercial truck inspections at southwest border ports of entry. This effort should include establishing goals for both queue waiting times (before entering the U.S. inspection compound) and commercial vehicle processing within ports of entry for the southwest border while ensuring compliance with U.S. laws and standards.

To improve the flow of commercial traffic at southwest border ports of entry, we recommend that the Commissioner of Customs work with the Department of State's Border Liaison Mechanism so that U.S. and Mexican Customs, the private sector, and other stakeholders on both sides of the border can better coordinate activities, such as hours of operation, that facilitate commercial traffic crossing the border.

To improve port of entry planning, we recommend that the Administrator of the General Services Administration develop and maintain, in coordination with the Border Station Partnership Council, a data base of facility requirements and current equipment and resources. This could be used to develop a strategy that would enhance the current use of technology to improve port of entry operations. We also recommend that the Administrator of the General Services Administration coordinate with the Border Station Partnership Council to develop and utilize empirical data on transportation flows and wait times at border crossings and conduct modeling so that existing southwest border ports of entry infrastructure can be better utilized.

To allow for more integrated planning of ports of entry and infrastructure at and leading to the U.S.-Mexico border, we recommend that the Secretary of Transportation work with Mexico, through the Joint Working Committee, to better coordinate the various binational planning processes. Such an effort, which may require a new memorandum of understanding, should be coordinated with the appropriate U.S. government agencies working at the southwest border.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We received written comments on a draft of this report from the Customs Service, the Department of State, and the General Services Administration. These are reprinted in appendixes V to VII. We obtained oral comments from the Department of Transportation, including the U.S.-Mexico Border Planning Coordinator and other senior officials; Immigration and

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Naturalization Service officials, including the Chief of Policy and Planning and representatives of the Office of Inspections and General Counsel; Food and Drug Administration officials, including the special assistant to the Director of the Office of Resource Management; and senior Department of Agriculture officials. We also provided a copy of a draft of the second appendix on infrastructure spending to state officials in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. Most of the agencies and one of the states provided technical comments to update or clarify key information that we incorporated where appropriate. In addition, we requested comments from Mexico's Secretariat of Foreign Relations, but none were provided.

The agencies that reviewed the draft generally agreed with our observations on transportation issues on the southwest border and the thrust of our recommendations to improve port of entry coordination and facility planning. The Immigration and Naturalization Service noted that it and the General Services Administration should be included as participating agencies in efforts to improve coordination of port of entry operations. We agree and, after additional discussion with the General Services Administration, we modified our recommendation to reflect this. We also modified our recommendation to specify that the Customs Service should take the lead in implementing the recommendation since the Customs Service has the primary role in processing commercial traffic at the border. Regarding our recommendation to improve port of entry planning, the General Services Administration notes that Congress has directed them to work with Customs to assess the condition and infrastructure needs at ports of entry along U.S. land borders and provide a report to Congress.<sup>23</sup> We modified our recommendation to state that the General Services Administration's should not only develop but also maintain a data base of facility requirements and current equipment and resources.

Department of Transportation officials made two overall comments on the report. First, Transportation officials expressed concern that the report implies that truck safety inspections are a major cause of congestion. This was not our intention, and we added language to the text noting that truck safety inspections do not require that cargo be unloaded. Second, Transportation officials stated that the report seems to overemphasize government causes of congestion and that Mexican customs brokers' practices and local trucking arrangements result in large numbers of empty

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<sup>23</sup>Public Law 106-58.

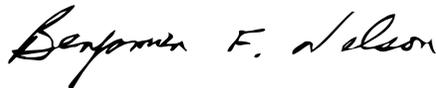
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trucks, and as such are major contributors to border congestion. Our report does not differentiate which of the factors affecting congestion we identified is most important. Rather, it provides data on the large number of empty trucks crossing the border and a discussion of the issue. Therefore, we did not make any changes. Regarding Mexican customs brokers, we added language to reflect the Department of Transportation's view that brokers' practices contribute to congestion. If the Department of Transportation believes that customs brokers and local trucking arrangements are major contributors to congestion, it may wish to raise this issue with the binational Joint Working Committee—a group in which the Department of Transportation actively participates.

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We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees and to the Honorable Dan Glickman, Secretary of Agriculture; the Honorable William M. Daley, Secretary of Commerce; the Honorable Madeleine K. Albright, Secretary of State; the Honorable Rodney Slater, Secretary of Transportation; the Honorable Doris Meissner, Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; the Honorable Raymond W. Kelly, Commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service; the Honorable David J. Barram, Administrator of the General Services Administration; and the Honorable Jane E. Henney, Commissioner of Food and Drugs. We will also make copies available to other interested parties upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-4128 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Other GAO contacts and staff acknowledgments are listed in appendix VIII.



Benjamin F. Nelson  
Director, International Relations  
and Trade Issues

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# U.S.-Mexico Cross-Border Transportation in Context

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The U.S.-Mexico border region has seen a significant increase in cross-border traffic in recent decades that has placed stress on the local and regional transportation infrastructure and created congestion at border crossings. One factor contributing to the congestion has been the dramatic growth in population along the border, spurred by the significant increase in industrialization in the border region. A related factor is that the growing economic integration between the United States and Mexico, due to the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, has resulted in a rising volume of trade between the two nations. By the end of 1997, Mexico had become the U.S.' second largest export market after Canada.

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## Overview of the Border Region's Geography, Demographics, and Economic Trends

The border region, as defined by the La Paz Agreement of 1983,<sup>1</sup> is 100 kilometers (62 miles) deep on either side of the border. The population on both sides has grown far faster than the population in either country as a whole, and current population projections forecast that the border population will double over the next 20 years to about 21 million. About 92 percent of the border population lives in 14 sister, or twin, cities that straddle the border. These sister cities, while legally separate cities in different countries, in reality often constitute binational and bicultural "single" communities. Members of the same family often live on both sides of the border, and many people commute daily to work or school across the border.

The catalyst for the dramatic increase in the border region's population was Mexico's initiation of the Border Industrialization Program in 1965. The program was designed to foster job growth in Mexico's northern region by sponsoring a maquiladora, or export assembly, industry.<sup>2</sup> As more jobs were created, more Mexican workers moved to border cities, which experienced significant population growth. For example, the population of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the sister city to El Paso, Texas, was about 262,000 in 1960. By 1980 it had grown to 650,000 and was estimated to have over

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<sup>1</sup>The 1983 Agreement for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment in the Border Area, 22 I.L.M. 1025, commonly referred to as the "La Paz Agreement."

<sup>2</sup>The maquiladora program allows duty-free imports into Mexico of materials and components from foreign suppliers. These processed materials are assembled into finished products that must then be re-exported from Mexico unless special approval is given to sell them in the Mexican market.

1.1 million residents by 1999. Tijuana, Mexico, experienced similar rapid growth, increasing from 428,000 in 1980 to about 989,000 in 1995.

Over time, the maquiladora industry became the engine of economic growth for the northern border region of Mexico. Since 1994, it has been the most dynamic sector of the Mexican economy, particularly in terms of job creation and exports. As of June 1999, the Mexican government's statistical agency reported a total of about 3,294 maquiladora plants throughout Mexico, with total employment of 1,136,377. Mexico's northern border states had 2,554 maquiladora plants with 935,577 workers, or about 82 percent of the maquiladora sector, according to Mexican data. The top locations for border maquiladoras included the cities of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and Tijuana, Baja California Norte. Table 3 shows the number of plants and employees in Mexico's northern border states as of June 1999.

**Table 3: Selected Maquiladora Industry Statistics, by Mexican Border State, June 1999**

<b>State</b>	<b>Number of maquiladoras</b>	<b>Number of employees</b>
Baja California	1,130	240,544
Sonora	266	94,557
Chihuahua	397	277,981
Coahuila	270	104,598
Tamaulipas	361	164,783
Nuevo Leon	130	53,114
<b>Total 6 states</b>	<b>2,554</b>	<b>935,577</b>
<b>Total national</b>	<b>3,294</b>	<b>1,136,377</b>

Source: Mexican National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Information.

In addition, real growth in the maquiladora industry averaged 23.5 percent per year from 1994 to 1998, according to CIEMEX-WEFA.<sup>3</sup> In 1998, gross maquiladora production was valued at \$65.8 billion, and the maquiladora industry accounted for 45 percent of Mexico's total merchandise exports. The four industry sectors that continue to dominate the maquiladora

<sup>3</sup>John H. Christman, *Maquiladora Industry Outlook*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Eddystone, PA: CIEMEX-WEFA, May 1999).

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**Appendix I**  
**U.S.-Mexico Cross-Border Transportation in**  
**Context**

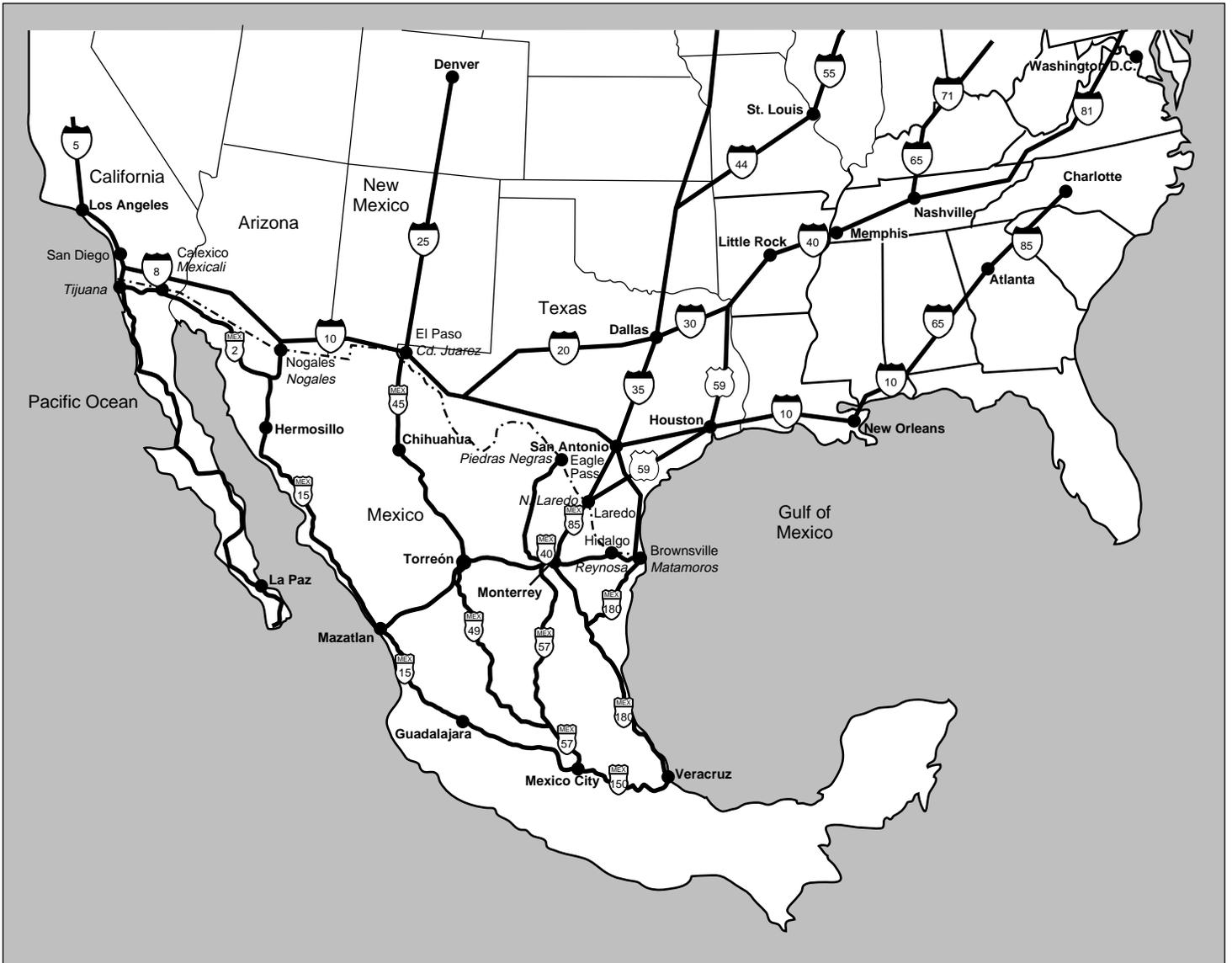
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industry are electrical and electronic products, parts, and components; automotive components and subcomponents; textiles and wearing apparel; and metallic or wooden furniture and accessories. According to CIEMEX-WEFA, these four sectors together accounted for 80 percent of all maquiladora gross exports in 1998 and were valued at \$42.2 billion.

The growth of trade between the United States and Mexico, especially given the production-sharing arrangements between U.S. and Mexican firms in the maquiladora industry, has meant that the transportation infrastructure needed to move goods has become increasingly important. In Mexico, the Secretariat of Communications and Transportation has identified the main highway corridors that handle a high percentage of commercial and passenger traffic and connect the nation's major production, urban, and tourist centers. The major highway corridors that meet at the U.S.-Mexico border are shown in figure 9.

**Appendix I**  
**U.S.-Mexico Cross-Border Transportation in**  
**Context**

**Figure 9: U.S.-Mexico Border and Major U.S. and Mexican Highway Corridors**



Source: Mexico's Department of Communications and Transportation and Joint Working Committee 1998 Binational Planning and Programming Study.

## Trade Growth Leads to Increased Commercial Traffic Crossing on the Border

The growing volume of trade between the United States and Mexico has placed pressure on the local transportation infrastructure of border communities. Total trade between the United States and Mexico increased from \$75.8 billion in 1992 to \$173.4 billion in 1998, when Mexico accounted for 11 percent of total U.S. imports. Approximately 75 percent of U.S.-Mexico trade (measured by weight) crossed the southwest border by truck in that year. According to the U.S. Customs Service, in fiscal year 1998 there were approximately 3.9 million truck crossings into the United States from Mexico, a 30-percent increase from fiscal year 1996. Table 4 shows the number of commercial truck crossings into the United States from Mexico on the southwest border in fiscal year 1998.

**Table 4: Nature of Northbound Commercial Traffic at the U.S.-Mexico Border, Fiscal Year 1998**

States (U.S.-Mexico)	Cities (U.S.-Mexico)	Bridge/crossing names	Total truck crossings	Full containers	Empty containers	Percentage containers examined
Texas/Tamaulipas	Brownsville-Matamoros and Los Indios-Lucio Blanco	Los Tomates, B & M, Gateway, and Los Indios	273,087	123,188	154,495	47
	Progreso-Nuevo Progreso	Progreso	17,298	4,197	12,909	57
	Hidalgo/Pharr-Reynosa	Pharr and Hidalgo	261,322	165,985	92,027	18
	Rio Grande City-Camargo	Rio Grande City	18,658	11,184	4,150	57
	Roma-Miguel Aleman	Roma	13,140	7,457	5,672	83
Texas/Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas	Laredo-Nuevo Laredo	Juarez-Lincoln Bridge II, Laredo IV, and Colombia III	1,340,653	610,217	667,086	28
Texas/Coahuila	Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras	Eagle Pass II <sup>a</sup> Eagle Pass I	85,974	51,087	44,074	23
	Del Rio-Acuna	Del Rio	50,949	32,870	14,993	30
Texas/Chihuahua	Presidio-Ojinaga	Presidio	6,883	4,098	2,855	38
	El Paso-Ciudad Juarez	Ysleta (Zaragosa) and Bridge of the Americas	591,258	255,684	187,491	35
New Mexico/Chihuahua	Santa Teresa-Juarez	Santa Teresa	28,206	21,632	7,283	85
	Columbus-Palomas	Columbus	4,013	2,712	921	85
Arizona/Sonora	Douglas-Agua Prieta	Douglas	35,561	14,828	14,121	53
	Naco-Naco	Naco	7,650	3,379	2,412	85

Continued

**Appendix I**  
**U.S.-Mexico Cross-Border Transportation in**  
**Context**

States (U.S.-Mexico)	Cities (U.S.-Mexico)	Bridge/crossing names	Total truck crossings	Full containers	Empty containers	Percentage containers examined
	Nogales-Nogales	Nogales	256,494	185,523	62,171	14
	Sasabe-Sasabe	Sasabe	1,844	520	541	100
	Lukeville-Sonorita	Lukeville	3,723	256	574	Not available
	San Luis-San Luis Rio Colorado	San Luis	42,472	22,207	11,233	25
California/ Baja California	Andrade <sup>b</sup>	Andrade				
	Calexico East- Mexicali	Calexico East	222,093	87,991	91,736	35
	Tecate-Tecate	Tecate	53,109	29,638	27,787	44
	Otay Mesa-Mesa de Otay	Otay Mesa	599,001	306,727	294,811	23
<b>Total traffic</b>			<b>3,913,388</b>	<b>1,941,380</b>	<b>1,699,342</b>	<b>29</b>

Continued from Previous Page

<sup>a</sup> Numbers are for Eagle Pass I, which handled commercial traffic until Eagle Pass II opened in 1999.

<sup>b</sup> Crossing is no longer commercial; commercial traffic now goes to San Luis.

Source: GAO analysis of Customs data.

The rate of increase in truck traffic varies between ports of entry. For example, for the six ports we visited to conduct case studies, rates ranged from an increase of 4 percent at Roma, Texas, to 50 percent at Laredo, Texas, from fiscal year 1996 to 1998. Commercial and passenger traffic volume can also be seasonal. For example, Nogales, Arizona, handles a high volume of fresh vegetables during the winter months. Cross-border passenger traffic generally increases around major holidays, particularly Christmas and Easter. Overall, the number of passenger vehicles entering the United States from Mexico rose 12 percent from 1996 to 1998, from 76 million to 85.4 million.

At the same time, while 75 percent of commercial traffic moves across the U.S.-Mexico border by truck, use of rail to move cargo has been growing steadily as well. The level of rail traffic almost doubled between fiscal year 1992 and 1998, increasing from about 184,000 railcars in fiscal year 1992 to 364,000 railcars in fiscal year 1998, according to Customs Service data. Laredo, with 160,984 railcars; Eagle Pass, with 71,151 railcars; and Brownsville, with 55,696 railcars, were the leading rail crossings, accounting for 79 percent of rail traffic.

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# Details on Infrastructure Spending and U.S. Port of Entry Facilities at the Border

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This appendix provides information on federal government spending for ports of entry. It also provides data on expenditures for road construction and infrastructure improvements in the four southwest border states from fiscal year 1994 to 1998. In addition, it includes an overview of infrastructure in place at southwest border ports of entry that handle commercial traffic.

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## Expenditures for Capital Improvements of United States-Mexico Border Facilities

Since 1987, Congress has appropriated about \$371 million for capital improvements to the United States-Mexico border facilities,<sup>1</sup> and about \$341 million was used for border work. Funds were to be spent to design and construct new ports of entry and to improve existing ports of entry.

The General Services Administration provided about \$157 million of the capital improvement funds for new southwest border ports of entry. California ports of entry completed under the program include Calexico East (\$55 million) and Otay Mesa (\$27 million). In Texas, new ports of entry constructed were Los Tomates (\$19 million), Los Indios (\$15 million), and Pharr (\$18 million). In New Mexico, the port of entry of Santa Teresa was constructed (\$10 million). Funding was also provided for a new port of entry at Tecate, California (\$13 million), but construction is on hold because Congress passed legislation to restrict the size of the facility.

The General Services Administration also spent about \$184 million of the capital improvement funds to improve southwest border ports of entry. These improvements covered such things as lane and station expansions, safety enhancements, adding or renovating administrative office space, and replacing several stations.

Not all of the \$371 million in funds originally appropriated for border facility improvements were used. In 1994 and 1995, Congress rescinded about \$16 million in funding,<sup>2</sup> and in 1999 the General Services Administration reprogrammed \$10 million that had been reserved for a port of entry at Sunland Park, New Mexico, into its space rental account. An additional \$4 million was also taken out of the program by miscellaneous congressional savings calculations.

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<sup>1</sup>Public Law 100-202.

<sup>2</sup>Public Law 103-329 and Public Law 104-19.

**State and Federal Highway Funding Used for Infrastructure Projects in U.S. Counties Bordering Mexico**

For each of the four southwest border states, we obtained information about the \$3.1 billion in state and federal funds designated for border roadway or highway infrastructure projects for the years 1994-98. Federal policy provides for the states to share in the cost of such projects. The total costs of border projects for the state of California for the years 1994-98 were about \$1.25 billion. California contributed about \$144 million, which represented about 12 percent of the costs. Arizona and New Mexico's costs for border infrastructure projects were about \$320 million and \$361 million, respectively. Their state contributions were similar, with Arizona contributing about 26 percent of project costs and New Mexico contributing about 24 percent. Texas' overall costs for border infrastructure projects during this period were \$1.21 billion. Of this figure, \$541 million, or 45 percent, was contributed by the state of Texas. Table 5 summarizes these data.

**Table 5: Funds Designated for Roadway Infrastructure Projects in Southwest Border States, 1994-98**

Dollars in millions

Years	State of California			State of Arizona			State of New Mexico			State of Texas		
	Total cost	Federal cost	State cost	Total cost	Federal cost	State cost	Total cost	Federal cost	State cost	Total cost	Federal cost	State cost
1994	\$75.5	\$66.8	\$8.7	\$38.4	\$31.5	\$6.8	\$49.3	\$34.9	\$14.4	\$207.8	\$145.1	\$62.7
1995	0	0	0	87.3	56.4	30.9	64.1	49.6	14.5	229.8	108.3	122.2
1996	749.6	663.6	86.0	28.4	20.2	8.2	46.7	38.0	8.8	230.7	138.5	92.2
1997	0	0	0	46.8	34.1	12.8	98.1	81.0	17.1	272.6	115.3	157.3
1998	421.6	372.8	48.9	119.1	94.9	24.2	102.8	69.5	33.2	269.5	162.9	106.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,246.7</b>	<b>\$1,103.2</b>	<b>\$143.5</b>	<b>\$319.9</b>	<b>\$237.0</b>	<b>\$83.0</b>	<b>\$361.0</b>	<b>\$273.0</b>	<b>\$87.9</b>	<b>\$1,210.5</b>	<b>\$670.1</b>	<b>\$541.1</b>

Notes:

1. California has two counties in the border region, while the states of Arizona and New Mexico have four counties each. Texas has 23 counties in the border region.

2. Totals may not add due to rounding.

Source: State departments of transportation.

**Texas**

As table 5 shows, the state of Texas designated about \$1.2 billion for infrastructure projects in 23 counties in the 100-kilometer border region with Mexico over the 1994-98 period. In April 1999, Texas created a separate border transportation initiative to help deal with NAFTA traffic. Under this program, the Texas Department of Transportation's NAFTA

discretionary program increased from \$8 million to \$50 million. In addition to the NAFTA discretionary funds, the Texas Department of Transportation and the state's Border Transportation Task Force developed a short-term (2000-2003) program to further accelerate NAFTA-related projects, at an estimated cost of \$350 million. A long-term program of projects (2004-2010) was also identified by state officials that is estimated to cost \$700 million. The Texas state legislature also enacted a bill, effective September 1, 1999, that requires the Texas Department of Transportation to establish and maintain one-stop border safety inspection stations in Brownsville, Laredo, and El Paso. These one-stop stations were funded at a total cost of \$8 million to \$9 million, but the state has not established a time frame for construction. Texas Department of Transportation officials believe that additional funds will be required to complete these one-stop safety inspection stations.

**California**

From 1994-98, California designated about \$1.25 billion for border infrastructure projects in the two counties bordering Mexico. California has a transportation network it calls the "NAFTA NET." This network links the ports of entry and border region to the state's existing transportation system.

**Arizona and New Mexico**

Arizona, which has less heavily used ports of entry, programmed about \$320 million during 1994-98, while New Mexico programmed about \$361 million. A major initiative undertaken by Arizona's Department of Transportation to facilitate cross-border traffic was the acquisition of a 10-acre parcel of land at the Nogales port of entry. Arizona officials expect this acquisition will, among other things, relieve truck congestion at the port of entry, double the size of the Customs complex to conduct more safety inspections, and provide additional space for hazardous materials and toxic loads. New Mexico has several ports of entry, of which Santa Teresa is the more heavily used port. New Mexico's two major ports of entry—Santa Teresa, located in Dona Anna County, and Columbus, located in Luna County—constitute the largest (geographically) commercial zone along the U.S.-Mexico border.

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**Characteristics of U.S. Ports of Entry That Handle Commercial Traffic on the Southwest Border**

The 25 ports of entry that handle commercial traffic along the southwest border have varying characteristics and expansion capability. Ownership of these ports of entry also varies and includes the federal government (through the General Services Administration), private owners, and counties. Table 6 provides an overview of these facilities, highlighting location, operating hours, and the number of lanes, primary booths,

secondary inspection docks, expansion capability, truck scales, and areas to park out-of-service vehicles leaking hazardous materials.

As table 6 also shows, there are 12 truck X-rays in place at southwest border ports of entry. Most ports of entry with a low volume of commercial vehicle crossings did not have either commercial truck scales or fixed truck X-ray equipment. Expansion capability at these ports of entry also varies, with some facilities, such as Los Tomates, which opened in 1999 in Brownsville, Texas, capable of expanding from 25 to 200 inspection docks. Otay Mesa, California, on the other hand, has 101 docks and can only be expanded to 114. The Bridge of the Americas facility in El Paso, Texas, is also constrained by space and cannot expand beyond its current 76 dock spaces, but El Paso's other port of entry, Ysleta, has room to double its current dock space. Smaller facilities include Sasabe, Arizona, with only two inspection docks, and Tecate, California, with three.

At most southwest border ports of entry, the Department of Transportation faces particular challenges with regard to space. Generally, Department of Transportation inspectors work out of either temporary portable modular sheds or share space with other inspection agency staff. According to General Service Administration officials, there are no plans to accommodate Department of Transportation inspectors at existing ports of entry or facilities currently being built such as in Laredo, Texas. General Services Administration officials said this is because the Department of Transportation has not made specific requests for permanent space. According to Department of Transportation officials, this is primarily because the Department views its role on the border as lasting only until the border states establish inspection facilities. For example, California has built inspection facilities at its ports of entry that serve commercial traffic and, therefore, the Department of Transportation has no inspectors at those facilities.

**Appendix II  
Details on Infrastructure Spending and U.S.  
Port of Entry Facilities at the Border**

**Table 6: Characteristics of 25 Commercial Ports of Entry to the United States From Mexico, Fiscal Year 1999**

States (U.S.-Mexico)	Cities (U.S.-Mexico)	Bridge crossing names	Facility ownership	Operating hours (hours for commercial traffic processing may be shorter)	Number of lanes		
					North	South	Pedestrian
Texas/Tamaulipas	Brownsville-Matamoros	Los Tomates	GSA	7A-11P	2	2	2
	Los Indios-Lucio Blanco	Los Indios	GSA	6A-12A	2	2	2
	Progreso-Nuevo Progreso	Progreso	Private	24 hours	1	1	2
	Pharr-Reynosa	Pharr	GSA	6A-12A	2	2	2
	Rio Grande City-Camargo	Rio Grande City	Private	7A-1A	1	1	1
	Roma-Miguel Aleman	Roma	Public	24 hours	1	1	1
	Laredo-Nuevo Laredo	Juarez-Lincoln Bridge II	GSA	24 hours	3	3	0
	Laredo IV	Public	6A-11P	4	4	2	
Texas/ Nuevo Leon	Laredo-Colombia	Colombia III	GSA	8A-12A	3	3	2
Texas/ Coahuila	Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras	Eagle Pass II	Public	24 hours	3	3	2
	Del Rio-Acuna	Del Rio	GSA	24 hours	2	2	2
Texas/ Chihuahua	Presidio-Ojinaga	Presidio	Private	24 hours	1	1	2
	El Paso-Ciudad Juarez	Ysleta (Zaragosa)	GSA	24 hours	4	4	2
		Bridge of the Americas	GSA	24 hours	6	6	2
New Mexico/ Chihuahua	Santa Teresa-San Jeronimo	N/A	GSA	6A-10P	1	1	1
	Columbus-Palomas	N/A	GSA	24 hours	1	1	1
Arizona/ Sonora	San Luis-San Luis Rio Colorado	N/A	GSA	24 hours	1	1	2
	Lukeville-Sonorita	N/A	GSA	6A-12A	1	1	2

**Appendix II  
Details on Infrastructure Spending and U.S.  
Port of Entry Facilities at the Border**

Primary booths		Secondary inspection docks		Empty truck lanes	Spaces available in export lot inspection area	Bins for bulk cargo inspections	X-ray search units (fixed)	Hazardous materials inspection spaces	Truck scales
Number	Expansion potential	Number	Expansion potential						
4	1	25	175	2	8	4	1	2	1
4	4	50	150	1	8	4	0	2	1
1	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
4	8	50	150	1	7	6	1	2	1
0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
4	0	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
8	4	100	100	2	10	2	1	0	1
8	0	100	100	1	0	6	1	1	1
2	4	25	75	0	0	5	1	0	1
2	4	20	80	0	5	3	0	1	1
0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	6	55	165	2	10	3	1	1	1
6	0	76	0	1	0	2	1	0	1
2	10	25	175	0	12	3	1	0	1
1	0	4	8	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Appendix II  
 Details on Infrastructure Spending and U.S.  
 Port of Entry Facilities at the Border**

States (U.S.-Mexico)	Cities (U.S.-Mexico)	Bridge crossing names	Facility ownership	Operating hours (hours for commercial traffic processing may be shorter)	Number of lanes		
					North	South	Pedestrian
	Sasabe-Sasabe	N/A	GSA	8A-8P	1	1	1
	Nogales West- Nogales	N/A	GSA	6A-8P	6	2	2
	Naco-Naco	N/A	GSA	24 hours	1	1	1
	Douglas-Agua Prieta	N/A	GSA	24 hours	2	2	2
California/ Baja California	Otay Mesa-Mesa de Otay	N/A	GSA	6A-10P	6	2	2
	Tecate-Tecate	N/A	GSA	6A-12A	2	2	1
	Calexico East- Mexicali	N/A	GSA	6A-10P	5	4	4

**Appendix II  
Details on Infrastructure Spending and U.S.  
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Primary booths		Secondary inspection docks		Empty truck lanes	Spaces available in export lot inspection area	Bins for bulk cargo inspections	X-ray search units (fixed)	Hazardous materials inspection spaces	Truck scales
Number	Expansion potential	Number	Expansion potential						
0	0	2	0	0	0	Y	0	0	0
2	1	76	0	1	0	Y	1	0	1
1	0	2	4	0	0	Y	0	0	0
3	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
5	0	101	13	1	70	8	2	1	2
1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	5	60	140	0	13	10	1	1	1

Legend

GSA= General Services Administration.

N/A= Not applicable.

Source: GAO analysis of information obtained in case studies and from the General Services Administration.

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# Inspection Agency Staffing Levels at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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The process of moving goods across the U.S.-Mexico border relies on the availability of staff to process and inspect merchandise for compliance with U.S. laws and regulations. These operations are often constrained, according to Customs officials, by the lack of available staff to effectively carry out these processes.

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## Customs Staffing Issues

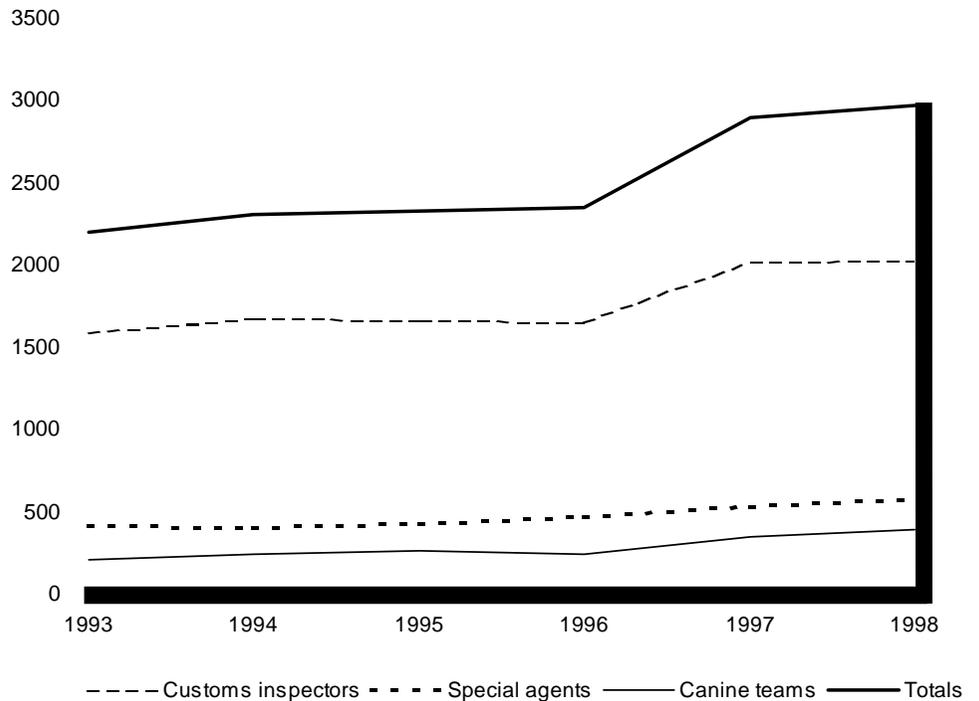
At all the ports of entry we visited, Customs and its union officials told us they needed more staff to conduct day-to-day operations in processing trucks through the commercial cargo ports of entry. Customs officials told us that they regularly have to keep staff on additional shifts (overtime) to have enough staff to operate the ports of entry. For example, at Nogales, Arizona, Customs officials said that, based on their internal needs' analyses, six additional inspectors were needed; at El Paso, Texas, a union representative reported that 30 additional inspectors were needed; and at Laredo, Texas, Customs officials told us that there were 37 inspector vacancies that needed to be filled. Staffing shortfalls were also reported at ports of entry that handle less commercial traffic. For example, at Rio Grande City, Texas, the Customs port director told us that current staffing is below what is needed at his existing facility. He expects that staffing will continue to be a problem when a much-needed new facility that is currently under construction opens next year. The new facility will have a truck X-ray, larger inspection area, and more lanes. The port director noted the new facility and technology will also require additional personnel to operate the X-ray, staff the new commercial primary entrance and exit booths, and cover the additional passenger vehicle lanes to be added.

Since NAFTA went into effect, Customs' inspection staffing levels nationwide and at the southwest border have increased, but Customs administrators report that there is not enough staff to handle the increases in truck traffic. Along the southwest border, there were 2,978 Customs' employees in fiscal year 1998, about 27 percent of Customs' national staffing.<sup>1</sup> From 1993 (before implementation of NAFTA) and through 1998, Customs' staff along the southwest border increased about 35 percent, while Customs' national staff increased about 22 percent. (Fig. 10 shows Customs' staffing at the southwest border in fiscal year 1998.)

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<sup>1</sup> There were 11,214 Customs employees (including inspectors, special agents, and canine teams) in fiscal year 1998.

**Figure 10: Customs' Staffing at the Southwest Border, Fiscal Year 1998**



Source: U.S. Customs Service.

## Other Inspection Agencies' Staffing Levels

Although the distinct agency missions and districts make it difficult to compare staffing levels, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food and Drug Administration officials at the ports of entry we visited reported recent increases in staffing levels. Food and Drug Administration staffing levels along the southwest border have risen from 14.5 in 1994 to 37 in 1999, for an increase of 155 percent. Food and Drug Administration officials in Otay Mesa, California, told us that they had recently hired two additional staff. USDA reported having 257 staff working on the southwest border, and USDA officials in Nogales, Arizona, reported they had planned to hire 12 additional staff during fiscal year 1999.

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# Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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Concerned about the U.S.-Mexico border area's ability to deal with U.S.-Mexican transportation increases associated with the North American Free Trade Agreement, members of the House Congressional Border Caucus asked us to undertake a broad review of issues related to cross-border transportation at the U.S.-Mexico border. Our objectives were to provide information and analysis on (1) the nature of commercial traffic congestion at the southwest border; (2) the factors that contribute to congestion; and (3) the actions, including programs and funding, that are being taken to address these problems.

The scope of our work focused on commercial truck traffic leaving Mexico and entering the United States, taking a binational, cross-cutting approach. While we looked at the operations of multiple agencies working at the ports of entry, our goal was not to conduct in-depth reviews of specific programs. To obtain information on the nature of commercial traffic congestion at the southwest border, we reviewed studies and prior work by public and private groups on this topic. In addition, we drew on our former work and that of outside groups that focused on NAFTA-related effects such as expected trade growth. A bibliography of the studies we consulted is included in this report.

We also conducted quantitative analyses of Customs' data on southwest border port of entry operations. We obtained data on inspections, empty trucks, and total trucks processed from Customs' offices in Washington, D.C. We also obtained Customs data on fiscal year 1998 northbound commercial traffic data that included hourly arrivals at major ports of entry, number of inspections performed, empty trucks being processed, and daily truck arrivals for ports of entry we visited. We analyzed the data on U.S. Customs' operations to determine the peak- and off-peak hours of operation at these ports of entry, the difference between the number of loaded and empty trucks, and the number of tractors at ports of entry we visited. To obtain some indication about the overall quality of the data and Customs' confidence in its accuracy and validity, we held discussions with a Customs headquarters official. The official explained that although there are some concerns about responses from ports of entry, the data were compiled using standardized definitions and entry formats.

To obtain information on factors that contribute to congestion at the U.S.-Mexico border, we reviewed prior GAO and other studies by federal, state, and local governments as well as by academic researchers and nongovernmental and binational organizations. We also met with representatives from the following U.S. federal agencies or departments:

the U.S. Customs Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Department of State, the General Services Administration, the Department of Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, and the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy.

To gain the Mexican federal government's perspective on transportation congestion and infrastructure needs at the border, we met with officials from the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, the Secretariat of Transportation and Communications, and the Comision de Avaluos de Bienes Nacionales. We also obtained documentation on Mexico's plans for port of entry improvement in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

To gain additional insight into factors that contribute to congestion at the border, we attended several major binational meetings where cross-border transportation issues were discussed. These included the U.S.-Mexico Binational Group on Bridges and Border Crossings meetings held in San Diego, California, in September 1998 and in Matamoros, Mexico, in April 1999. We also participated in the "Border Walk" sponsored by this group that was held in February 1999 in the Brownsville, Texas, area and featured visits to port of entry facilities on both sides of the border in south Texas/northern Mexico. We also attended the conference held by the Border Trade Alliance (a coalition of private and public groups) in Washington, D.C., in March 1999 and the Western Governors' Association conference in San Antonio, Texas, in April 1999, where a wide range of stakeholders discussed border congestion concerns.

To identify and gain perspectives on actions being taken at the local and state level to address U.S.-Mexico border congestion, we conducted binational case studies in the border sister cities listed in table 7. We chose these cities because they provide an overview of the variety of activities on the southwest border. The communities included four major crossings—Laredo and El Paso, Texas; Nogales, Arizona; and San Diego, California—which handle about 70 percent of the northbound traffic crossing the border. These crossings also receive a mix of maquiladora, seasonal produce, and commercial traffic destined for the interior of Mexico.

**Table 7: GAO Case Study Communities in the United States and Mexico**

<b>U.S. city and state</b>	<b>Mexican city and state</b>
Nogales, Arizona Crossing: Mariposa	Nogales, Sonora
Laredo, Texas Crossings: Juarez-Lincoln and Colombia	Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon
El Paso, Texas Crossings: Bridge of the Americas, Ysleta	Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua
San Diego, California Crossing: Otay Mesa	Tijuana, Baja California
Eagle Pass, Texas Crossings: Eagle Pass I and II	Piedras Negras, Coahuila
Roma, Texas Crossing: Roma	Ciudad Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas

We also conducted case studies in Eagle Pass and Roma, Texas, to better understand the needs of border communities that handle less commercial traffic. While in Roma, Texas, we also visited Rio Grande City, Texas, and met with officials from Camargo, Tamaulipas, and observed port of entry operations on both the U.S. and Mexican sides of the border. During our case study in San Diego, California, we also visited and observed operations at Tecate, California, and Mexico. Likewise, while in El Paso, Texas, we visited and observed conditions at the Santa Teresa, New Mexico/San Geronimo, Chihuahua, port of entry. In all, we visited 18 of the ports of entry that handle commercial traffic.

During the case studies, we interviewed officials from the United States and Mexico, including representatives of the U.S. and Mexican consulates, about interagency coordination, binational challenges, options for improvements, and the potential impact of program, policy, and infrastructure changes. In U.S. communities, we also met with local mayors, city planners, state transportation officials, and local business groups such as customs brokers associations and the Chamber of Commerce. At U.S. ports of entry, we interviewed officials from all inspection agencies represented at the port of entry, and General Services Administration facilities administrators. In Mexican communities, we met with port of entry administrators and representatives of groups that regularly use the ports of entry such as the maquiladoras, Mexican industries, truckers, customs brokers, and Chambers of Commerce.

To analyze southwest border infrastructure spending patterns, we reviewed federal expenditures as well as state and federal funds programmed for

border highway projects. We obtained information from several sources, including the General Services Administration, U.S. public laws between 1987 and 1995, and congressional reprogramming actions taken between 1988 and 1998. We analyzed these data to identify the types and cost of improvements made at ports of entry. We also developed a profile of the ports of entry that handle commercial truck traffic at the southwest border (see app. II).

We also obtained expenditures for border infrastructure projects from the departments of transportation for the four southwestern border states. Department of Transportation and state officials provided information on how federal and state apportionments of the total project costs could be determined. With this information, we determined the amount of federal and state funds allocated to border infrastructure projects. While we did not independently verify the information provided by the states, we talked with state transportation officials about data accuracy and validity issues relevant to this work.

We conducted our work from September 1998 through December 1999 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

# Comments From the General Services Administration

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
Administrator

January 28, 2000

Mr. Benjamin F. Nelson  
Director, International Relations and Trade Issues  
National Security and International  
Affairs Division  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Nelson:

The General Services Administration has reviewed the draft report "U.S.-Mexico Border: Better Planning, Coordination Needed to Handle Growing Commercial Traffic" (GAO-NSIAD-00-XX). We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the report and we concur with GAO's recommendations.

While GSA has already taken steps to improve the coordination and facility planning through the efforts of the Border Station Center of Expertise and its involvement with the Border Station Partnership Council, we agree that a database will provide valuable information for facility planning purposes. The data can be used to evaluate proposed improvements through computer simulations. These actions, which are already underway, will improve GSA's ability to assist the Federal Inspection Services in reducing congestion at our borders. Specific comments on the report recommendations are provided in the enclosed statement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David J. Barram". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

David J. Barram  
Administrator

Enclosure

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**General Services Administration**

**Comments on GAO Draft Report "U.S.-Mexico Border: Better Planning  
Coordination Needed to Handle Growing Commercial Traffic"  
(GAO-NSAID-00-XX)**

Recommendation 1

The General Services Administration will develop, in coordination with the Border Station Partnership Council, a database of facility requirements and current equipment and resources. This could be used to develop a strategy that would take into consideration the potential use of technology to improve port of entry operations.

Comment:

Concur. GSA recognized the importance of the border ports of entry by establishing the Border Station Center of Expertise in October 1997. The Center was established to improve the planning, design, and construction of border stations along the United States Border. The Border Station Center has a staff of seven who provides expert advice to the GSA regions and the Federal Inspection Service agencies.

In May 1998, the Border Station Center initiated the first meeting of the Border Station Partnership Council that was established by a memorandum of understanding in 1997 (page 28). The Partnership Council has met quarterly since then to work towards its goal "to ensure that the planning, design, construction, and operation of border facilities are done in a cooperative and cost effective manner." The Partnership Council established priorities and working groups for those priorities. Working groups were established for the following issues:

- 1) Border pricing;
- 2) Long-range planning;
- 3) Residential housing;
- 4) Security; and
- 5) Developing a common database.

The first few meetings focused on these issues to determine priorities. From GSA's perspective, border station pricing and long-range planning have been the focus for the past year.

Now on p. 24.

2

See comment 1.

The Partnership Council has recognized the need to involve other Federal agencies in our discussions, especially as they relate to long-range planning. It is important to note that representatives from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) have been very involved in the planning process for ports of entry on individual projects and through the Bridges and Border Crossing meetings and Border Station Center of Expertise conferences. In fact, both agencies attended the December 1999 meeting held in South Texas. We have agreed to invite them to attend future meetings to assist in improving our planning process.

The Council has been looking at the need of a database of information for border stations since the council was formed. Due to other priorities, this effort had not made much progress in the past year; however, the Treasury and General Government Appropriations Bill for 2000 included the following language on Ports of Entry Infrastructure Assessment:

*"The Committee is concerned about the current condition of the ports of entry along the U.S. land borders. Therefore, the Committee directs the Customs Service, working in consultation with the General Services Administration, to assess the current condition and infrastructure needs of these ports and provide a report to the Committee within nine months after enactment of this Act on a plan to address these needs and the resources required to do so. The committee expects the Customs Service to coordinate with the Federal and State border agencies in this effort."*

The need to produce this report has now brought the importance of a database back as a priority. The Customs Service has developed a draft template of data elements that can serve as an inventory of equipment at the ports of entry. GSA is simultaneously working on some web-based software that will allow building condition information to be entered and tabulated. Part of the report to Congress will be the planned facility and infrastructure improvements for the ports of entry. The results of these efforts will be a well-defined plan along with very up-to-date data on our facilities. The remaining issue will be to establish a mechanism for accessing, securing, and updating the data. GSA is willing to work with the Partnership Council to address those issues along with the funding of the maintenance costs of the database.

Recommendation 2

GSA will develop and use empirical data on transportation flows and wait times at border crossings and conduct modeling so that existing border ports of entry infrastructure can be better used.

Comment:

Concur. The Border Station Center of Expertise has recognized the need for computer modeling of our border stations since it was established in 1997. The Center has included this item in its business plan and has been using contract vendors to analyze individual projects. The results have been favorable but costs to evaluate all of entry would be very expensive. At the last Partnership Council meeting, the FHWA made a presentation to the Council on the merits of using modeling software. The presentation was well received and it was agreed that the Council would pursue the merits of developing a procurement package that would provide a software package that could be used by all the agencies. The first meeting of the working group was scheduled for January 13, 2000, in Washington, DC.

General Comments on the Draft Report

Now on p. 5.

*Page 6:* GSA agrees that "because facilities planning and port of entry operations take place in a complex political and economic environment characterized by competing interests and differing development priorities, these efforts collectively have neither been able to keep up with the rapid increase in the volume of goods crossing the border nor to alleviate congestion." With that in mind, GSA would question the wording of factor 6, "poor port of entry planning and limited coordination" considering the complexities of the working environment.

See comment 2.

GSA constructs border facilities based on the requirements provided by the Federal Inspection Service agencies. These requirements are often a balance between an agency's immediate and/or future needs, staffing, and its facility rent allowance. Whenever possible, provision for future growth is incorporated into the master planning of new ports. In many cases, existing ports cannot be easily expanded because surrounding communities have grown to enclose them, or ports were originally built in developed, high-density locations. When traffic far outstrips the allowance for traffic growth, the agencies are caught unprepared, and the facility becomes inadequate. GSA agrees that port of entry planning and coordination can be improved with additional funding and resources but would not label the planning process as "poor."

Now on p. 20.  
See comment 3.

*Page 24, Table 2:* At Rio Grande City, a new leased facility is under construction that will address the facility deficiencies. At Tecate, construction of the expanded facility is scheduled for fiscal year 2001.

Now on p. 22.  
See comment 4.

*Page 25, first paragraph:* While it is noted that "ports of entry that process larger traffic volumes, particularly those in crowded downtown locations, there is no room to expand operations," there are good environmental reasons to move out of downtown facilities, especially in El Paso, that should be noted somewhere.

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**Appendix V  
Comments From the General Services  
Administration**

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4

Now on pp. 23-24.  
See comment 5.

*Page 27, last paragraph:* The statement “not all the inspection agencies with responsibilities at the border participate in inter-agency facility planning meetings” is not accurate. While all inspection agencies have not participated in the Border Station Partnership Council meetings, all inspection agencies do participate in interagency facility planning meetings. All the inspection agencies are invited to submit requirements for individual projects, along with participation during the planning and design development process of projects. In addition, all agencies are involved in the Border Station Center’s conferences and attend the Bridges and Border Crossings meetings chaired by the Department of State. As noted in the response to recommendation 1, the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Transportation will be invited to future facility planning meetings of the Border Station Partnership Council.

Now on p. 24.  
See comment 6.

*Page 29, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph:* GSA suggests that GAO confirm the Department of Transportation’s policy regarding its “temporary” inspection role rather than quoting GSA.

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The following are GAO's comments on the General Service Administration's letter dated January 28, 2000.

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## GAO Comments

1. The General Services Administration states that Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration officials attended the December 1999 meeting of the Border Station Partnership Council. We revised the report to reflect this new development that took place subsequent to the completion of our work (see p. 24).
2. The General Services Administration questions the wording of factor 6, "poor port of entry planning and limited coordination" considering the complexities of the working environment at the southwest border. The report recognizes that there are many challenges in carrying out planning in an environment where trade and traffic have grown and there are often physical constraints on expanding ports of entry. We found, however, that not all agencies have been actively participating in interagency planning efforts. We note in the report that this appears to have changed since we completed our work.
3. We modified table 2 to note that construction of a new facility is underway at Rio Grande City, Texas, and that construction of a new facility is scheduled for fiscal year 2000 in Tecate, California.
4. We noted on page of our report that air pollution associated with idling vehicles waiting to cross the border is an issue of concern in several communities. While the General Services Administration may believe there are good environmental reasons to move port of entry operations out of downtown areas, we note that such action would require agreement among a number of local, state, and federal stakeholders on both sides of the border.
5. See comment 1.
6. We confirmed the Department of Transportation's policy with its officials and have changed the text accordingly.

# Comments From the Department of State

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



**United States Department of State**

*Chief Financial Officer*

*Washington, D.C. 20520-7427*

January 18, 2000

Dear Mr. Hinton:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report "U.S.-MEXICO BORDER: Better Planning, Coordination Needed to Handle Growing Commercial Traffic," GAO Job Code 711420.

The Department of State's comments are enclosed for incorporation in the final report. If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Mr. David Randolph, Office of Mexican Affairs, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, at (202) 647-8529 .

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bert Edwards".

Bert T. Edwards

Enclosure:

As stated.

cc:

GAO/NSIAD- Mr. Hutton  
State/WHA/MEX - Mr. Randolph

Mr. Henry L. Hinton, Jr.,  
Assistant Comptroller General,  
National Security and International Affairs,  
U.S. General Accounting Office.

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**Appendix VI**  
**Comments From the Department of State**

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Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report  
"U.S.-MEXICO BORDER: Better Planning, Coordination Needed to  
Handle Growing Commercial Traffic"  
GAO Job Code 711420

The Department of State appreciates the opportunity to review this draft GAO report. The transportation infrastructure demands of the rapidly growing border region present an enormous challenge to policy makers at many levels. We appreciate the GAO's valuable contribution and welcome the opportunity to comment.

As the chair of the Interagency Working Group on Bridges and Border Crossings and as co-chair--along with the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Relations--of the United States-Mexico Binational Group on Bridges and Border Crossings, the Department is familiar with the complex issues cited in the report and will continue to work with other federal agencies, state agencies and the Government of Mexico to resolve them.

We would like to note that the Department is also a member of the Joint Working Committee, as is the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Relations, and suggest that this be incorporated in footnote 15 on page 26. Also, with regard to the problem of congestion at ports of entry, it is worth mentioning that the JWC has agreed to take the lead in conducting a study of ways of improving port management to integrate the operation of enforcement agencies and expedite the flow of traffic. This is in response to the request in the Border Governors Conference Joint Declaration of September 10, 1999.

Regarding the requirement that trucks carrying hazardous cargo use the Colombia Bridge rather than the downtown Laredo Bridge mentioned on page 27, it should be noted that this is not simply a policy of U.S. Customs. Rather, this provision was specifically included in the Presidential Permit that authorized the new Laredo IV Bridge.

Now on p. 22.  
See comment 1.

Now on p. 23.  
See comment 2.

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**Appendix VI**  
**Comments From the Department of State**

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Now on p. 32.  
See comment 3.

The Department welcomes the inclusion in the report the mention of the Border Liaison Mechanism (BLM) on pages 38-39. To avoid giving the impression that BLMs focus solely on the issues listed, we suggest that some reference be made to their other areas of interest such as economic development, health care and protection of the environment. Regarding the recommendation on page 42 that U.S. Customs work with the BLMs to better coordinate activities with Mexican Customs, the private sector and other stakeholders, we agree that the BLMs can play a useful role here. However, we want to emphasize that such a dialogue in the context of the BLMs should only supplement and should not supplant the very important direct and fluid contact that local U.S. Customs officials maintain with their Mexican counterparts along the border.

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The following are GAO's comments on the Department of State's letter dated January 18, 2000.

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**GAO Comments**

1. We revised the report to include the State Department and the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Relations as members of the Joint Working Committee.
2. We revised the report to remove the reference to U.S. Customs as requiring trucks carrying hazardous cargo to cross at the Colombia Bridge rather than downtown Laredo, Texas.
3. We revised the report so that our discussion of the Border Liaison Mechanism now includes the full range of activities these groups work with rather than several examples.

# Comments From the U.S. Customs Service



DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY  
U.S. CUSTOMS SERVICE

January 13, 2000

Mr. Benjamin F. Nelson  
Director, International  
Relations and Trade Issues  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Nelson:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on GAO's draft report entitled U.S.-Mexico Border: Better Planning, Coordination Needed to Handle Growing Commercial Traffic.

The report discusses issues concerning the increasing commercial traffic on the Southwest border. The report indicates that a majority of the traffic crosses at only a small percentage of the available facilities, due predominantly to availability of accessible highway infrastructure. Certainly, transportation inadequacies contribute to the described congestion at these burdened facilities. Better coordination among the affected agencies, communities, and private sector entities will undoubtedly assist in alleviating this situation. Furthermore, the proposed International Trade Data System (ITDS), part of Customs Automation Modernization effort, would be instrumental in reducing congestion at the border, through an automated truck manifest system. However, Customs lack of funding for the modernization effort has thus far prevented the development of this technological solution.

We concur with the recommendations presented in your report. The Office of Field Operations will take the lead in implementing the relevant recommendations. Many of these proposals refer to issues that the Office of Field Operations is presently addressing.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report. If you have any questions, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Brenda Brockman at 202-927-1507.

Sincerely,

  
William F. Riley  
Director, Office of Planning

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# GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

John Hutton, (202) 512-7773

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## Acknowledgments

In addition to the person listed above, Phillip Herr, Leyla Kazaz, Lee Kaukas, Rona Mendelsohn, Syrene Mitchell, Enemencio Sanchez, and James Smoak made key contributions to this report. Phillip Herr took the photographs used for this report.

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*U.S.-Mexico Border: Issues and Challenges Confronting the United States and Mexico* (GAO/NSIAD-99-190, July 1, 1999).

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