

Arizona Burning

We know the Murphy Fire was likely set by a man in distress. What do we know about the border's other fires?

by [Leo W. Banks](#)

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["Out of Control", by Leo W. Banks, "Prevention, Not Suppression", by Roy Keene and Tim Hermach, and the editor's note, by Jimmy Boegle.](#)

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The borderlands of Southern Arizona have burned, and the destruction is stunning.

Thousands of acres of land along the line blackened. The Chiricahua Mountains scorched, some areas so damaged that a return to pre-fire conditions will take hundreds of years. Homes in the Huachuca Mountains near Sierra Vista swept away in the flames and the wind.

No time to pack up! ... It's go now! ... Now!

The evacuees show up at community meetings, their faces ghostly from the terror that has come to their lives, and now they're left to grapple with important questions we can no longer ignore: Who did this? How have we come to this bad place? How do we keep it from happening over and over, assuming there is anything left to burn?

We know for certain that the three most-destructive border fires this year—the Horseshoe 2, Murphy Complex and Monument fires—all took place along major smuggling routes. In the case of the Murphy Fire, there's strong evidence that it was started by a crosser in distress. (See the accompanying story, ["Out of Control"](#))

What about the other two? The citizens impacted by these fires are demanding answers, but the federal government isn't playing along. At these same community meetings, representatives of the U.S. Forest Service and Border Patrol offer their oft-repeated response—human-caused, under investigation—while declining to entertain the possibility that some of these fires might be set by smugglers.

A typical meeting took place in Douglas on June 17. A fellow asked Douglas District Ranger Bill Edwards, "Instead of saying human-caused, why can't you say it was UDAs (undocumented aliens), because we all know what's going on?" Edwards replied, "We don't know that. We didn't see them start it."

The standoff has left citizens putting circumstantial evidence together and coming to their own conclusions, and they're doing that across the borderlands with varying degrees of certitude.

"I hate to be negative," says documentary filmmaker Mercedes Maharis, who lives on the east slope of the Huachucas, scene of the Monument Fire, "but these fires are suspicious in every way."

Meteorologist Art Douglas, who lost his home in Ash Canyon in the Huachucas, says he was told flat-out by a Border Patrol agent that the Monument Fire, which began at the border about 1 p.m. on June 12, was started by a group of illegals that agents had been monitoring all day.

"I have no problem saying that is probably exactly what happened," says Douglas, a Democrat who is a former chair of the atmospheric sciences department at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.

Taking the temperature of friends and neighbors in the Chiricahuas, Dinah Davidson says, "There's no doubt in anyone's mind here how the Horseshoe (2) Fire started. We had a fire on the same smuggling trail last year."

The semi-retired biology professor missed the first evacuation of her home, in Cave Creek Canyon, because she was in Pennsylvania at her mom's funeral. When she returned to Arizona and to her home, she withstood the smoke from the Horseshoe 2 Fire as long as she could. But on Thursday, May 26, when it became so sickening that it required oxygen, Davidson finally fled, accepting a friend's offer of a bed across the state line in Animas, N.M.

At 8 p.m. that night, the 63-year-old called me, the flames and smoke visible from her temporary digs. "It's a holocaust up there," she said, her voice drained and shaken. She talked at length about the impact of what she considers the government's destructive silence.

"If the Forest Service could say, 'Yes, we have a problem with illegals setting fires,' they might be able to solve it," says Davidson. "But you

can't solve a problem you don't acknowledge and call by its name. They can't help us unless they tell the truth, and they won't tell the truth. We're very angry here. This was totally, 100 percent predictable."

It's certainly true that some of the fires on our border this year had nothing to do with smugglers or illegal aliens, as the accompanying chart shows.

But it's also true that crossers starting fires has been a problem in Southern Arizona for years, says Ron Colburn, former national deputy chief of Border Patrol whose career included a stint as patrol agent in charge in Nogales.

He says illegals set fires to cook or stay warm in the mountains at night, then walk away after possibly tossing dirt on them—but usually not water, which they need to keep walking.

"We often used the smoke in the early morning to get a jump on the aliens, because we could see it billowing up from the trees, and we'd start our chase from there," says Colburn.

Another category involves purposeful fires set by smugglers—some to attract law enforcement to one place while running a load through elsewhere, others to escape from the Border Patrol. More recently, says Colburn, within the past 10 years or so, coyotes have begun telling the people they're guiding to set signal fires when they fall into distress, and these sometimes turn into wildfires.

The coyotes, to seal the deal and get paid, have to counter public-service announcements on Spanish-language TV and radio warning potential crossers against undertaking such a dangerous trip. They hand out cheap cell phones to sway potential customers, saying if you get in trouble, call for help, or just set a fire.

"This is what they're being coached to do, and it's typical of the callousness of the coyotes," says Colburn. "It's like telling them you'll only walk a few miles, and it's 60 miles, then handing out meth to keep them going. Do you think the coyotes care if the forest burns down? They don't care."

Statistics on border fires are scarce, although that might change with the release of a Government Accountability Office study, originally set for November. In a letter written last July, Arizona Sens. Jon Kyl and John

McCain requested the report, saying fires started by illegal aliens and smugglers "have cost millions of dollars to suppress and have damaged important natural resources."

Also hard to come by are officials willing to talk on the record. Keith Graves served for 10 years as Nogales district ranger for the Coronado National Forest and now works as a liaison between the Forest Service and the Secure Border Initiative. He has long been a source for straight talk on the border. But when contacted before the big fires, he declined to answer questions for this article. He has been told not to talk to reporters unless cleared by Washington, D.C., and recently when he requested clearance, no one got back to him.

"It's so cotton-picking political," says Graves.

Dan Wirth, the Interior Department's Southwest border law-enforcement coordinator, came as close as anyone to producing hard numbers. He did so in a 2002 study on the multiple threats cross-border smuggling posed to public lands in Arizona.

On the specific matter of fires, his report said, "Undocumented Mexican nationals were suspected of causing eight major wildfires (of 100 acres or more) and destroying 68,413 acres or 108 square miles of public lands in FY 2002."

The report continued: "Hundreds of other wildfires, less than 100 acres (usually 1 to 5 acres), were also caused by undocumented Mexican nationals entering the U.S. through DOI and USDA lands."

Most were caused by "discarded cigarettes or matches, or campfires carelessly left burning. ... Wildfires such as this are common in the summer months along the U.S./Mexico border."

In a conversation two weeks before the big fires, Wirth noted that the numbers in his study were actually rather small. "Those are only the anecdotal ones I was aware of from talking to investigators. The real number probably could've been bigger."

Four years later, in 2006, Tina Terrell, a Forest Service supervisor, made essentially the same points in testimony before Congress.

But Wirth's study was such a bombshell—on fires, the terror threat, environmental decimation and more—that it was buried by Interior

under George W. Bush and later Barack Obama, and no follow-up was done. He said the official reason was that the military-intelligence experts and the money needed to do it were no longer available.

"Don't you want to know the unofficial reason?" asked Wirth, who is retiring at the end of the year. After the question was asked, he chuckled and said he couldn't speak officially, eventually saying that even though some politicians wanted a follow-up done, it was just too hot of a political potato.

Speaking about the whole range of problems on the border, not just fires, Wirth said, "It's like, if you don't know of a problem, you don't have to deal with the problem, so you don't have the problem."

But Wirth added that it's tough for both Forest Service and Interior to give specific numbers on border fires because neither agency collects that data. He says it's too much of a judgment call. "The investigator on the scene might have a really good idea, but there's no way to definitively prove, other than it was human-caused, who those humans were."

A Forest Service employee familiar with the matter, who asked not to be identified, says the agency in 2006 stopped recording fires as possibly started by crossers, and explained the change: "In the past, if there was trash from Mexico out in the middle of nowhere, and the investigation showed a fire was human-caused, we said it was started by a UDA. But you don't know that. A camper can start a fire that gets away and throw trash down to make it look like it was a UDA camp. If you just have products from Mexico there, it doesn't prove anything. It wouldn't hold up in court."

The agency doesn't want to accuse a UDA, any more than a citizen, of a crime they cannot prove. "You point fingers at UDAs, and it could be very, very embarrassing," the source continued. "It creates some very strong political actions. Our attorneys have told us if we don't have anybody to prosecute, we have to say human-caused."

Agency lawyers are working with law enforcement on a new method of logging fires—as, for example, set intentionally, set by a camper, set to impede arrest, set by a UDA and so on.

When will this happen? Frustrated, the source replied, "When our lawyers get around to it."

But some say that on the subject of the border and illegal aliens in general, the Forest Service has become so politically correct that it's afraid to say much of anything.

"The Forest Service has drifted off into la-la land," says Ralph Pope, who retired from the agency in 2009 after 40 years in a variety of jobs, including fighting fires as an air-attack supervisor. "By the time I left, it got so bad (that) if you said illegal aliens did this or did that, you got scolded."

Dinah Davidson has a mountain of company in believing the Horseshoe 2 fire was set by smugglers—and it's prudent to note that at least part of that certainty flows from heartbreak and anger. But doubt is nowhere in evidence in the Chiricahua Mountains.

"We have people of all political persuasions here, but this is one thing everybody agrees on," says Ken Jones, a 72-year-old retiree living near Portal, in Southeastern Arizona.

The fire flared up on a major smuggling route in the notorious Chiricahua Corridor, this one through Horseshoe Canyon. About 9 1/2 miles up from the mouth of Horseshoe is Burro Springs, what should be a beautiful spot in the shade of oak trees in the Chiricahua Wilderness. But drug smugglers have turned it into a working camp at 6,800 feet.

Back in 2008, led by local residents, I hiked into Burro to photograph the site. We saw a water trough tipped upside down for shelter, and ankle-deep garbage over a half-acre of ground. The trash piles there and along Horseshoe make good fire accelerant, although in these historically dry times, worsened by a hard winter freeze on Feb. 2, it doesn't take much for a fire to go out of control.

A blaze taking 3,400 acres flared up in Horseshoe last year, on May 26, 2010, the so-called Horseshoe 1 Fire. Early fire maps place its start less than eight-tenths of a mile north of Burro, says Bill Wilbur, former head of Portal Fire and Rescue; maps show Horseshoe 2 starting just south of Burro. The largest wildfire ever recorded in the Chiricahuas, Horseshoe 2 burned across 222,954 acres and cost more than \$49 million to fight after starting on May 8, 2011.

Three weeks before Horseshoe 1, on May 6, 2010, the South Fork Fire flared up a mile and half north and east of Burro. Firefighter Mark South, who fought the 90-acre fire and later hiked the grounds, says that

on a saddle above the spot where it started, he found a lay-up site—with 30 backpacks, trash and clothing. South says South Fork was likely a smuggler fire. All three of these fires were human-caused.

Couldn't a legitimate visitor have left his campfire untended? Sure, it's possible.

"But no hiker in his right mind will go up there," says Jones. "The Mexican cartels own the tops of the Chiricahuas. It's called the United States, but it's under the control of the drug cartels."

Cochise County Sheriff Larry Dever says that except for a few out-of-towners unaware of the situation, Jones is correct. He puts the odds at "99 percent-plus" that smugglers started the fire. "I wouldn't flinch for a second telling people there's no reason to believe it was anything else," says Dever. "There's nobody up there but bears, lions and smugglers."

Another bit of testimony: Bill Miller, who lives in a remote canyon 39 miles from the border, on the New Mexico side of the corridor, tells of listening to his police scanner out on his deck the night of May 7. He heard the chatter of Border Patrol agents out of Lordsburg, N.M. Miller says they use old analog radios that are not encrypted. His radio also picks up the Cochise County Sheriff's Office and their counterparts in Hidalgo County, N.M.

Living in an area beset with drug- and human-smuggling, break-ins, a home invasion and the murder of rancher Rob Krentz, the radio helps him stay safe. Miller lives with his wife and elderly mother, and says, "I use the scanner as a first line of defense in case something comes up."

That night, Miller says he heard talk of Border Patrol agents trailing four illegals into the mouth of Horseshoe. It was about 6:30 p.m., Arizona time, just before dark. About 8:30, Miller's scanner barked again with a request for agents to go into nearby South Fork and up to Paradise to head them off. "It got late, and I didn't pay much more attention," says Miller, a retired pilot who flew pipeline patrol for El Paso Natural Gas. "The next morning, the fire was in Horseshoe, and by afternoon, it was massive."

Miller has good relations with Border Patrol and has allowed them to keep a small camp on his land, including a truck equipped with mobile-surveillance technology. He says agents told him the illegals were

tracked up to where the fire started. "Did they set it?" Miller asks. "I think they probably did."

Ramiro Cordero, public information officer at the Border Patrol's El Paso sector, did not respond to a request for comment by press time.

Is any of this conclusive evidence that Horseshoe 2 was a smuggler fire? No. In every account, there is room for misunderstanding and miscommunication. Residents like Joy Mendez, who lives five miles outside Portal, acknowledge that hard proof is absent. "But we have common sense, and we know who is in our mountains," she says.

For folks living at the southern end of the Chiricahua Corridor, along Geronimo Trail, Horseshoe 2 added another column of black smoke to their horizon, in what has been a nerve-wracking time. Resident Wendy Glenn put together a list of fires that have plagued that area—eight, on both sides of the line, since March 28.

Glenn says some have been suspicious, looking to her like "someone trying to be ornery and burn a little bit of the U.S.A."

On April 1, two volunteers at the San Bernardino Wildlife Refuge, east of Douglas on Geronimo Trail, were working near the border when they saw, about a half-mile away, smoke and fire near the bridge at Black Draw. The bridge runs east to west along the line, and the fire was about 25 yards south of it in Mexico.

The men put binoculars on the fire and saw a white truck fleeing from the smoke across the ranch south of the border and onto the Mexican highway toward Agua Prieta.

"It was going at a high rate of speed," says Lee Morgan, a writer and former assistant special agent in charge with the Department of Homeland Security's office of investigations. His partner, David Portillo, a former Border Patrol agent who retired as the agent in charge in El Paso, says the truck was moving so quickly that it "threw up a thick column of dust getting away."

By the time the men got to the scene, the fire was on the bridge and burning north onto the protected riparian area in Black Draw, which is part of the refuge. Forest Service fire crews, already fighting another fire nearby in Guadalupe Canyon, arrived quickly, and Morgan and Portillo secured the perimeter to allow the crew to work safely to stop the fire.

No one saw the driver of the truck light the fire—but Morgan says there was no one else in the area. He adds that everyone on the scene assumed it was an attempt to burn the bridge, completed last winter, to prevent Border Patrol agents from traveling on the border road across the refuge, a popular crossing point for smugglers. Trackers reportedly followed the footprints of Krentz's suspected killer through Black Draw into Mexico after his murder on March 27, 2010.

The fire was quickly put out and didn't do much damage. But Morgan and Portillo say if it had been a weekend, when no one was on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife property, it could've spread out of control.

Refuge manager Bill Radke did not return e-mails seeking comment.

Says Morgan: "Regular UDAs crossing is one thing. But a pickup truck going back to Mexico and (Agua Prieta), I think that kind of tells you it's somebody other than UDAs. It's smugglers of one nature or another."

Anna Magoffin, who lives near Guadalupe Canyon with her husband, Matt, says, "I've thought all long the cartels are trying to burn us out."

In May of last year, she told the *Weekly* that in the year previous, there had been six fires on her land that she believes were set by smugglers who'd dropped their loads and were heading back south. She has no idea why smugglers would start fires when they were so close to getting back into Mexico. "But I know they're being started by south-borders on border trails, so there is no doubt in my mind it's non-U.S. citizens doing it," she says.

Magoffin adds a postscript: The Horseshoe 2 Fire started on Mother's Day, and by Father's Day, her elderly parents' home in Ash Canyon was gone, destroyed by the Monument Fire.

The story with the Monument Fire near Sierra Vista is the same—a smuggler's trail; a suspicious, human-caused fire; and local residents willing to talk about what they saw and heard.

On the afternoon when the fire started, Art Douglas was outside of his house in Ash Canyon, four miles from the border, when he spotted smoke over Thompson Peak to the south. He called his neighbor Larry Kastens, and the two of them drove toward the Coronado National Memorial to check it out. It was about 2 p.m.

When a Border Patrol agent stopped them two miles down the Memorial Road, Douglas asked what he knew about the fire. "The first thing the agent said was, 'I've been down here all morning in communication with our guys who have been watching a group of illegals. They started the fire, and it was probably a diversionary tactic to bring in either drugs or people.'"

Douglas says the agent didn't hesitate in his response. "He didn't say, 'I think this is what happened,'" says Douglas. "He said, 'This is what I heard.' It was never presented as supposition. What boggles my mind is that in reading stuff about the fire, no one has come out and said what I just told you."

Kastens, a 71-year-old retired schoolteacher, confirms Douglas's account.

Two days later, the fire went through Ash Canyon and destroyed Kastens' home, and Douglas' as well—on his 64th birthday. In addition to his former job at Creighton, Douglas also worked through the United Nations as a long-range weather forecaster for the Mexican government between 1995 and 2007.

Dan Wirth at Interior, which operates Coronado National Memorial, declined to comment on Douglas' account.

Border Patrol spokesperson Colleen Agle responded by e-mail: "A Border Patrol agent was on-duty patrolling the area and saw smoke in the distance. As law enforcement officials and members of the communities we protect, agents are trained to respond to any incident. The agent immediately drove towards the source of the smoke and after arriving to the area, he determined it was too large for him to extinguish by himself. He immediately reported all relevant information to the Forest Service which is conducting the investigation."

Douglas tells a different story. He says he asked the agent how many trucks were fighting the fire. The agent said one, explaining it was then only a grass fire. As a meteorologist who knows something about weather and wind patterns, Douglas said, "Sir, this could be a serious fire, and millions in homes could be ruined."

"I'm only Border Patrol," the agent said. "We don't fight the fire."

Douglas said, "You really need to call someone and tell them this is a very serious situation."

"I heard you," the agent responded.

Even though the agent made reference to illegal aliens, firefighter Mark South, who fought the Monument Fire early on, says it started right across the line on the Mexican side. Asked about this, Douglas said, "The agent didn't say they were in Mexico. He implied they were right on the border. Call them smugglers then."

South adds that he, too, was told by Border Patrol agents, in three separate conversations, that illegals had started the fire.

The ignition point was where the tall pedestrian fence ends, and the Normandy vehicle barriers begin.

Sheriff Dever tells the *Weekly* he believes it was a smuggler fire, citing the drug trail passing right through the area into the Huachuca Mountains. He adds that the park was closed at the time of the fire, with no one legally allowed in. "There was nobody down there but smugglers and illegal aliens," he says.

But John Morlock, acting National Park Service administrator for the Monument Fire, told the Reuters news agency the road leading into the park was open.

The aftermath of the Monument Fire has residents asking how this could have been avoided. Filmmaker Maharis blames Washington politicians who sacrifice the safety of people on both sides of the border by "allowing immigration reform to remain on the backburner." She is best-known for her 2005 documentary on how the border trouble has impacted Cochise County residents on both sides of the issue. The film's title—now ironic—was *Cochise County, USA, Cries From the Border*.

Cries, indeed. In an e-mail, Maharis wrote: "Heroic firefighters miraculously saved our house, (with) smoke and minor damage, but the second-largest bioregion in the world surrounding it is dead. The deer, bobcats and birds we loved ... gone. Heartbreaking. We plan to move back to Nevada."

Notwithstanding the various testimony given here, the truth about these fires is still murky. But it should be easy enough to find out.

Well, not easy. The agencies have to talk. The Forest Service needs to answer questions. If Border Patrol has tapes of its radio transmissions, they could release them. Or they could make available the agents working the Horseshoe Canyon area the night of May 7, and they could tell us, at least, if they did chase four illegals into the canyon. Agents working at the Coronado Memorial on Sunday, June 12, can tell us if they were monitoring a group at the border, and if they saw them light the fire.

The truth will do us all good, no matter what it is. Without it, the subject will remain an open sore used by both sides in a divisive issue, as we've already seen from the blowback against Dever and Sen. John McCain after they linked the fires to illegals and smugglers. If we try, we can get close to learning what really happened, perhaps with the help of a congressional subpoena.

Barring that, some borderland residents fear the cause of these historic disasters will remain hidden behind a fog of political correctness.

Ray Mendez, Joy's husband, likens Forest Service and Border Patrol officials to military people. "They get marching orders and say what they're told to say," says Mendez. "I don't think they lie. They bury and obfuscate. Janet Napolitano says the border is secure."

If the border were indeed secure, how could smugglers make a home for themselves in the Chiricahua Mountains, 50 miles north of the border? Why haven't the Border Patrol and Forest Service gotten together and done a better job of shuttering the trails across the Chiricahuas and closer to the border? Rather than spending tens of millions of taxpayer dollars on fire suppression, shouldn't we have used it to take back our mountains?

Davidson, an Obama voter, says, "My God, if we can fight in Afghanistan, we can fight in the Chiricahuas."

Ralph Pope suggests what could be a partial solution to the fire threat: He says the Forest Service needs a forward-thinking law-enforcement program that maps out the smuggler trails, camps and lay-up sites. Then they should send officers in on horseback to places like Burro Springs on a monthly basis, if not more often, to monitor the smuggler-activity level, clean up trash and maintain a presence.

For a long time, Pope says, the Forest Service has recognized the risk of smuggler fires, and the potential danger to citizens and firefighters from running into these guys. The agency has a training video warning its firefighters about working in the borderlands, and they've put up signs warning citizens about smugglers. "But when it comes to an actual burn that's causing damage, it's like, 'We don't know nothing,'" says Pope.

Will that continue? Davidson, a board member of the Chiricahua Regional Council, a public-agency watchdog group, fears it will. She notes that the most recent draft of the Forest Service's 15-year plan for the Coronado National Forest is virtually silent on what she considers its two biggest challenges—climate change and illegal-alien fires. "Big fires two years in a row, and the only thing they say in 113 pages is two throwaway lines about working with Border Patrol to stay abreast of illegals transiting the area," says Davidson. "It's crazy."

Says Dever: "The folks who write the policies on the border aren't living the consequences. They don't listen to the people on the ground."

Art Douglas echoes that. He says the power of the people living at the border has been usurped by the Washington, D.C., bureaucracy that runs Border Patrol, the Forest Service and all of the other agencies. He believes these bureaucracies put their interests above the people's, especially after a disaster, when they go into a job-protecting, budget-protecting, pension-protecting crouch. "I really think there's a cover-up underway," says Douglas.

He cites the unfolding scandal at the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives: U.S.-purchased guns were allowed to "walk" into Mexico and into the hands of the drug cartels. Two of these Romanian AK-47s were recovered at the scene of Brian Terry's murder.

"I think with relations with Mexico already tense, the government doesn't want to pursue the possibility of illegals starting these fires," says Douglas. "I know that's conjecture, but it's what I think."

Several wildfires are burning in hot, dry, windy conditions. - Articles from The Weather Channel | weather.com. The Bush Fire is one of three major wildfires burning in Arizona, fueled by hot, dry, windy conditions. The dry weather in particular is expected to persist in the coming days. "There is no rain in sight in Arizona, and it will only heat up more next week. In Tucson, for example, we're forecasting highs that could approach 110 degrees next week. AZ Burners is a community of artists, builders, and creators seeking to extend the Burning Man experience, principles, and culture into Arizona. We do this through events and activities, including multi-day celebrations Saguaro Man and AZ Decompression, a public burner art exhibition IGNiGHT, and service work performed under the umbrella of AZ Burners Without Borders. IGNiGHT. An exhibition of Burning Man-inspired art begins with a free, all-ages experience and virtual event March 19, 20, 21 2021, at Alwun House. This is a list of known wildfires in Arizona. National Interagency Fire Center. InciWeb - Arizona Incidents. Southwest Coordination Center. Arizona Interagency Wildfire Prevention. US Forest Service. Fire Restrictions - Arizona. Public Lands Information Center - Arizona Fire News. Coconino NF fire history web map.