

Maine border agents vigilant in wake of terrorist attacks

BY JEN LYNDSEY
BDN STAFF

HOULTON — With U.S. security concerns heightened after the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris, agents who secure our nation’s borders are being ever vigilant to assure that extremists are not smuggled into the U.S.

While more resources are devoted to the southern border with Mexico, which is patrolled by 18,000 U.S. border agents compared with 2,200 on the Canadian border, security remains a priority in Maine with a focus on initial questioning and secondary screening at ports of entry and strategic use of canines and special technology.

Maine does not see the criminal apprehension and seizure numbers that other offices across the nation do, but agents here still remain vigilant and do encounter various incidents at and between the state’s ports of entry on a daily basis, according to Michelle Benson-Fuller, spokeswoman for Customs and Border Protection in the northeast.

On a typical day across the nation, she said, Customs and Border Protection agents welcome nearly 1 million visitors, screen more than 67,000 cargo containers, arrest more than 1,100 individuals and seize nearly 6 tons of illicit drugs.

In Maine, more than 25 individuals were arrested in connection with human smuggling cases from October 2005 to October 2015, according to Benson-Fuller.

Individuals encountered in these cases were nationals of Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, India, Mexico and Portugal.

The cases, however, typically involve illegal aliens looking for a better life in America.

In 2011, for instance, a Canadian woman agreed to

hide an illegal alien in the trunk of her car and drive across the border to a restaurant in Madawaska for \$1,500. The two were caught, however, when the car was selected for secondary inspection at the port of entry.

In 2014, a Canadian man and his wife were arrested after he tried to cross the border alone in Jackman and agents found a woman’s clothing in the car. A targeted search of the area located the wife, dressed in camouflage, hiding in nearby woods, and both were arrested. She was a citizen of Brazil and legal permanent resident of Canada but did not have immigration papers allowing her into the U.S.

Benson-Fuller noted that some of the 24 ports of entry in Maine are guarded around the clock, and others, such as the port of entry in Forest City, a rural community at the border of Washington and Aroostook counties and the province of New Brunswick, have limited operations.

Aside from the 24 ports of entry here, there are six U.S. Border Patrol stations, a U.S. Border Patrol Sector Headquarters office and an Air and Marine Operations unit.

The Forest City border crossing is considered a “low-volume port of entry” that is open only from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday and is closed on Sundays and holidays. Officials said that an average of 6.6 cars pass through the port each day.

Benson-Fuller said that ports that are not open full time are manned by using cameras, sensors and other advanced technology that is strategically placed in locations on the international border to detect, deter and apprehend any illicit activity.

In October, for instance, a Maine man was arrested after his car set off sensors as he tried to enter the U.S. illegally via a field road

leading from New Brunswick, Canada, into Blaine, Maine. He pleaded guilty this month in federal court to a charge of failing to present himself at a border crossing point and faces up to a year in prison.

Meanwhile, on the southern border in Arizona, since 2013, the Border Patrol indicated in a press release that it detained about one Pakistani per day at the border in 2013, 70 people from Afghanistan, almost 400 from England and more than 800 from Vietnam.

According to the Customs and Border Protection, 3,338 people were arrested trying to cross the Canadian border in 2014. Of those, 1,673 were from countries other than Mexico.

“In this ever-changing world, it is critical for officers and agents throughout Maine to remain alert and ready 24/7, 365 days of the year, and to remain just as vigilante today as any other day,” said Benson-Fuller.

Protecting the border involves managing and patrolling the border, and working jointly with law enforcement officials in both Maine and Canada with operations and intelligence sharing, and with key stakeholders and the public, she said.

Benson-Fuller said the public plays a significant part in keeping the border secure as well.

“If someone sees something or someone that is suspicious, they should contact law enforcement to report the incident,” she said. “As members of the community, they know what and who belongs in the area or if something is out of place. The information and observations provided by members of our border community have proven to be valuable assets in securing the border Maine.”

Suspicious activity can be reported by calling 800-851-8727.



Conant Road heading towards Easton, just west of the start of the Conant-Fort section of the Presque Isle Bypass. The industrial complex that includes McCain Foods and Huber Engineered Woods is visible in the distance.

Presque Isle bypass in sight

BY ANTHONY BRINO
BDN STAFF

After years of discussion, a bypass around Presque Isle’s Main Street is gradually becoming a reality.

The Maine Department of Transportation is finalizing land acquisitions between the Conant and Fort Fairfield roads, aiming to begin construction next year on the first of what may become two or three sections of the Presque Isle Bypass.

“We are progressing with the relocations of the early acquisitions,” said Rhobe Moulton, senior project manager at Maine DOT, referring to the four homes and two commercial properties affected by the Conant-Fort route. “We are in the process of appraising for this section, so rights such as land acquisition and drainage rights have yet to be acquired.”

The \$14 million, approximately 1.5-mile bypass section will offer a new thoroughfare for trucks heading to and from McCain Foods and Huber Engineered Woods in Easton. For years, those trucks have had to drive through downtown Presque Isle and the residential and medical zone of Academy Street, a less-than-

ideal situation for both residents and the truck drivers.

Less traffic would be a welcome relief to drivers, pedestrians and residents in the areas around Main and Academy streets in Presque Isle, although the project has still been controversial, with lingering doubts about the benefits and concerns about residents in the line of the bypass. “There were 10 years of study. There’ve been a lot of frustrations,” Moulton said. “So many years of planning, and people start to believe it’s not going to happen.”

The Conant-Fort bypass is set to open in 2018. Among other factors, the construction has to contend with a “substantial ledge cut,” Moulton said.

Building the rest of the Presque Isle bypass will stretch into the 2020s, as part of a long-envisioned thoroughfare carrying traffic around residential and downtown areas of Presque Isle. But the full extent of a three-phase, \$120 million proposal has yet to be decided.

The Maine DOT is planning to build the second proposed phase of the bypass, an approximately 5-mile corridor that would veer east of Route 1 north of the Westfield town

line near Perkins Road and connect with Route 10 and Conant Road.

The agency already has acquired three buildings along that section, and construction is supposed to start in 2018, although Moulton said she “wouldn’t be surprised if that doesn’t end up sliding.”

The second section has drawn skepticism in the past as being too long and disruptive to farmland. “We don’t want another road from nowhere to nowhere,” Danny Stewart, whose farm property lies around the beginning of the route, told the Star-Herald in 2013.

The third proposed section of the bypass would link Fort Fairfield Road to Route 1 north with a new bridge crossing the Aroostook River. That also has drawn criticism, since it would disrupt residences and farmland and since a major thoroughfare already carries traffic to Route 1 and a relatively young four-lane bridge less than two miles away.

The Maine DOT’s plan is to construct the first two phases and then evaluate the need for the third section, Moulton said. “It may indicate that the third phase may not be necessary.”

Aroostook County sheriff deputies using body cameras

BY JOSEPH CYR
STAFF WRITER

HOULTON — In today’s rapidly changing technological age, law enforcement officials must also keep up with the times in an effort to stay one step ahead of criminals.

Sheriff Darrell Crandall of the Aroostook County Sheriff’s Office said in order to accomplish that goal, his office has turned to body-worn video cameras to aid officers in getting more criminals prosecuted through the court system.

“The departments with all the money were the ones to get them first,” Crandall said. “We have had ours for about nine months now.”

Outfitting every patrol deputy with a camera was the easy part, Crandall said. Figuring out how to manage the wealth of data recorded by the cameras was another matter.

“Getting those cameras deployed was just the first step,” he said. “We wanted to be sure we had all the steps in place so that additional changes were not needed.”

That meant making sure the sheriff’s office was adequately equipped with computers and storage servers to handle the digital video files, and to archive them in such a way that the information easily could be obtained if needed by the district attorney’s office when prosecuting cases.

“What the public doesn’t consider is there are so many ramifications to having this data available,” Crandall said. “We didn’t have a policy in place. None of us were experts in body-worn cameras, so we had to research how other departments were managing them.”

Therefore, each deputy’s cruiser has been outfitted with an external hard drive,



JOE CYR | BDN
Deputy Erica Pelletier shows off one of the body cameras now being worn by all members of the Aroostook County Sheriff’s Office.

which allows the deputy to download footage to a secure storage system so the camera can be used for additional recording.

Because deputies may start their shift at one location and end it in another part of The County, figuring out how to get all of the data stored on the cameras or external hard drives was one hurdle to overcome.

“We have limitations that other departments do not have to think about,” Crandall said. “I have deputies that start and end their shifts more than 150 miles apart, so we had to figure out how the technology was going to work. We had to have a centralized data storage server that is encrypted and has the capacity to be backed up.”

All of the digital data cannot be erased or modified, except by one system administrator. All data is kept for a time period that varies depending on the nature of the footage. For example, video footage of an individual getting a speeding ticket may only be kept for a short period of time, whereas footage of a domestic assault could be kept longer.

“There is only a certain amount of data that can stay on the camera,” he said. “If a deputy responds to an incident, they have up to six hours worth of recording time.”

In the nine months they have been used, deputies have been receptive to the devices.

“Nobody has complained,” he said. “Cameras have never hurt a cop who is doing things right. As long as they are trying to do the right thing, the camera is their friend.”

For instance, if an individual is arrested or summoned and later claims that a deputy assaulted him, the video footage can be checked to see if there is any validity to that person’s claim.

Because the videos are evidence, getting that evidence to the district attorney’s office proved to be another challenge. Crandall said they did not want to risk using online file sharing services because the material being shared could be sensitive in nature and has the potential to be hacked.

Instead, the sheriff’s office provides copies of its videos to the district attorney’s office on DVDs.

The office was able to outfit its deputies thanks to a federal Homeland Security grant.

Crandall said dashboard cameras, while a good concept when they first were unveiled, had a limited use as they only shot footage directly in front of a police cruiser. His office has phased out dashboard cameras in favor of the body worn cameras.

“The cameras were something we felt very strongly about doing,” Crandall said. “They are recording any time there is any substantive interaction with the public or whenever they are called to a scene for an investigation.”

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