Border Patrol seeks text on suspicious activity

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(AP) -- U.S. Border Patrol agents often use horses to look for smugglers in the forested mountains along the Canadian border, but now will be adding a more modern tool to help them keep watch - text messaging.

The agency on Tuesday began asking residents, campers, hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts to send anonymous text messages to report suspicious people they come across in the lightly populated area from Washington to Montana.

"Each alert person is going to be an extra set of eyes and ears for us," said Danielle Suarez, spokeswoman for the agency's Spokane Sector, referring to the 200 agents who patrol the region.

The agency is also pushing a companion service that allows people to send tips through the website, tipsubmit.com. Officials say the e-mail is necessary in a region where cell phone coverage is sparse and some residents don't have the devices.

"Texting, I'm not hip with that yet," said Pat Zimmerman, who co-owns the combination quilting shop and state liquor store in Metaline Falls, a scenic town of 220 people about 10 miles south of the border. She said she'll likely use the e-mail service.

Immigrant rights groups say they are worried because similar efforts have devolved into racial and ethnic profiling.

"It can lead to targeting of particular communities," said Pramila Jayapal, executive director of OneAmerica, a Seattle immigrant rights group. "It creates the sense that somehow we should be suspicious."

To prevent profiling, the Border Patrol has been running classes in border communities to teach residents what to look for, Suarez said.

Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, said the plan makes good sense, adding that many police departments are set up to receive text message tips.

"There is no reason this cannot and should not be implemented in the area of border security," he said.

The border here is a 10-foot wide clearcut called "the Slash," carved from the dense forest. Short obelisks are located every few miles that say "Canada" on one side and "United States" on the other. People can quickly disappear into the trees here.

Lonnie Moore runs the Metaline Falls, Wash. office, which has 21 agents and covers more than 33 miles of the border.

About 95 percent is public land, and agents use trucks, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles and horses on their daily patrols, where they sometimes find themselves contending with moose and grizzly bears.

Most of the illegal activity involves drug importing from Canada, along with people trying to get into the United States from places like Mexico, India and South Korea, after making the relatively easy entry into Canada, Moore said.

Having the aid of residents and others to report tips would be a huge help, Moore said.

"We already receive calls," Moore said. "We would receive even more."

Agents already make nearly 90 percent of their contacts based on tips from the public and other law enforcement agencies, he said.

A key element of the plan is anonymity for the text message sender, which is important in small towns where people often know nearly everyone. Each tip is automatically assigned a number, allowing agents to ask for more information without knowing who the sender is.

The text service is active now. People who see suspicious activity can text 274637 (it spells "crimes"), type `bordertip" and send a message.