

**CBP Should Improve Its
Air Coordination in the
Rio Grande Valley Sector**





DHS OIG HIGHLIGHTS

CBP Should Improve Its Air Coordination in the Rio Grande Valley Sector

October 18, 2018

Why We Did This Review

In March 2017, the President of the National Border Patrol Council testified to Congress that Air and Marine Operations (AMO) flew “very little” at night and that United States Coast Guard (Coast Guard) pilots had to fly missions for U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) agents in the Rio Grande Valley sector. We initiated an inspection in July 2017 to determine whether AMO and Coast Guard supported USBP Agents at night in the Rio Grande Valley sector.

What We Recommend

We made one recommendation to improve air coordination in the Rio Grande Valley sector.

For Further Information:

Contact our Office of Public Affairs at (202) 981-6000, or email us at DHS-OIG.OfficePublicAffairs@oig.dhs.gov

What We Found

AMO flew routinely at night to support USBP in the Rio Grande Valley sector. Because Coast Guard’s primary mission is conducting flights over water, its flight hours represented less than 1 percent of the Rio Grande Valley sector flight hours supporting USBP missions over land.

CBP should improve its air coordination to respond to the highest priority of USBP requests. During our inspection, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) established an operations center to improve air coordination at night in the Rio Grande Valley sector, but the operations center did not establish metrics to gauge the effectiveness of air coordination. If CBP continues to implement the operations center and develop metrics to gauge the effectiveness of air coordination, those efforts should improve the effectiveness of air support in the Rio Grande Valley sector and enhance unity of effort among CBP components.

CBP Response

CBP concurred with the recommendation, and it will create a joint working group between AMO and USBP to continue to implement the operations center. CBP will also establish performance metrics and evaluate whether the operations center improves air coordination in the Rio Grande Valley sector.



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Department of Homeland Security

Washington, DC 20528 / www.oig.dhs.gov

October 18, 2018

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Kevin McAleenan
Commissioner
U.S. Customs and Border Protection

FROM: John V. Kelly 
Senior Official Performing the
Duties of the Inspector General

SUBJECT: *CBP Should Improve Its Air Coordination in the
Rio Grande Valley Sector*

For your action is our final report, *CBP Should Improve Its Air Coordination in the Rio Grande Valley Sector*. We incorporated the formal comments from U.S. Customs and Border Protection in the final report.

The report contains one recommendation aimed at improving air support in the Rio Grande Valley Sector. Your office concurred with the recommendation. Based on information provided in your response to the draft report, we consider the recommendation open and resolved. Once your office has fully implemented the recommendation, please submit a formal closeout letter to use within 30 days so that we may close the recommendation. The memorandum should be accompanied by evidence of completion of agreed-upon corrective actions and of the disposition of any monetary amounts. Please send your response or closure request to OIGAuditsFollowup@oig.dhs.gov.

Consistent with our responsibility under the *Inspector General Act*, we will provide copies of our report to congressional committees with oversight and appropriation responsibility over the Department of Homeland Security. We will post the report on our website for public dissemination.

Please call me with any questions, or your staff may contact Sondra McCauley, Assistant Inspector General for Audits, at (202) 981-6000.



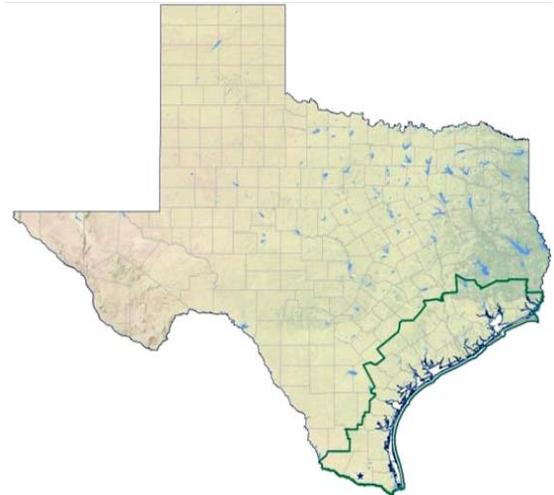
Background

The Rio Grande Valley sector is located in southeast Texas along the U.S. southwest border (figure 1 displays a map of Texas and the Rio Grande Valley sector.) The Department of Homeland Security has several components operating in the Rio Grande Valley sector, including U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) and Air and Marine Operations (AMO), and the United States Coast Guard (Coast Guard).

According to USBP officials, the Rio Grande Valley sector is the most vulnerable sector on the southwest border. USBP agents face clashing cartels on the Mexico side, rugged terrain, and drug and human trafficking. USBP statistics show that in 2017, the Rio Grande Valley sector ranked first in national apprehensions and rescues; second in marijuana seizures; and third in cocaine seizures (see appendix B for Rio Grande Valley sector apprehensions and seizures).

USBP operates out of its sector headquarters in Edinburg, Texas, and nine stations. Its primary mission is to prevent people and drugs from entering the United States illegally along more than 320 miles of land border with Mexico.

Figure 1. Texas and the Rio Grande Valley Sector



Source: USBP

Figure 2. View from an AMO Helicopter Assisting USBP



AMO operates flights in the Rio Grande Valley sector from an air base in McAllen, Texas. Its mission includes providing air support for USBP and conducting law enforcement flights over land (see figure 2 for AMO supporting a USBP arrest). It also assists U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and other Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

Source: DHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) photograph of USBP agents from an AMO aircraft



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According to AMO officials, in fiscal year 2017, it contributed to apprehending 14,054 aliens; and seizing 29,612 pounds of marijuana and 268 pounds of cocaine (see appendix B for AMO-reported statistics).

Coast Guard operates flights in the Rio Grande Valley sector from Corpus Christi. Its primary mission is conducting Search and Rescue, Law Enforcement, Ports and Waterways Security, Marine Safety, Drug and Migrant Interdiction, and Marine and Environmental Protection flights over water. Coast Guard also supports law enforcement missions with coastal border patrols, off shore patrols, and support to CBP.

Results of Inspection

AMO Routinely Provides Air Support in the Rio Grande Valley Sector for USBP

AMO routinely flew at night to support USBP in the Rio Grande Valley sector. Specifically, between FYs 2015 and 2017, AMO flew an average of 6,869 hours — 88 percent — of its total flight hours in the Rio Grande Valley sector supporting USBP missions. About 35 percent of those flight hours, or an average of 2,432 hours, were at night. AMO flew the remaining 973 hours (12 percent of total hours) in the Rio Grande Valley sector for training, investigations, maintenance, and non-enforcement (table 1 shows AMO flight hours in FYs 2015-17 for USBP in the Rio Grande Valley sector).

Table 1. FYs 2015–17 AMO Flight Hours in Rio Grande Valley Sector

	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	3-Year Average
AMO Hours Flown for USBP at night	2,554 (33%)	2,336 (35%)	2,405 (39%)	2,432 (35%)
AMO Hours Flown for USBP during the day	5,272 (67%)	4,309 (65%)	3,730 (61%)	4,437 (65%)
Subtotal Hours Flown for USBP	7,826	6,645	6,135	6,869
Total AMO Hours Flown	8,664	7,428	7,433	7,842
Percentage of AMO Hours Flown for USBP	90%	90%	83%	88%

Source: AMO Tasking, Operations, & Management Information System



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During that same time, Coast Guard reported that it flew 137 hours¹ in the Rio Grande Valley sector supporting USBP missions over land — 55 of those flight hours (or 40 percent) occurred at night. Because Coast Guard’s primary mission is conducting flights over water, these hours represented less than 1 percent of the Rio Grande Valley sector flight hours supporting USBP missions over land.

AMO Cannot Meet USBP Flight Hour Requirement

Although AMO flies at night to support USBP missions in the Rio Grande Valley sector, AMO cannot meet USBP’s requested annual flight hours. AMO officials said they fly the budgeted flight hours in the Rio Grande Valley sector, but do not have the pilots or aircraft to meet USBP’s requests. AMO hours for USBP decreased 22 percent from FY 2015 to FY 2017. AMO used temporary duty pilots in 2015 to supplement flight hours. After hiring pilots, in 2017, AMO increased training and non-enforcement hours, reducing hours supporting USBP (table 2 shows the number of hours USBP requested in FYs 2015-17 compared to the number of hours AMO flew).

Table 2. Hours USBP Requested in the Rio Grande Valley Sector Compared to Actual Hours Flown for FYs 2015-17

	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017
USBP Requested Hours	42,380	33,839	35,359
AMO Hours Flown	7,826*	6,645*	6,135
Percentage of Hours Flown	18%	20%	17%

*AMO hours flown include temporary duty pilots to supplement the air station in the Rio Grande Valley sector.

Source: DHS OIG analysis of USBP and AMO data

USBP and AMO began testing small-unmanned aircraft systems in September 2017 to help fill the capability gap. According to USBP officials, these systems will provide situational awareness to agents in locations difficult to access.²

¹ According to Coast Guard, between FYs 2015 and 2017, it flew 12,930 hours from Air Station Corpus Christi in the Rio Grande Valley sector. Included in these hours were 4,550 flight hours for law enforcement in and around the Rio Grande Valley sector, conducting coastal border patrols, off shore patrols, and support to CBP.

² Three USBP agents in the field launch and pilot small-unmanned aircraft when air support is not available. An agent pilots, another controls the camera, and a third agent monitors for safety.



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Efforts Underway to Improve Rio Grande Valley Sector Air Support Coordination

In December 2017, USBP began a joint operations center (OPCEN) to coordinate air operations with AMO in the Rio Grande Valley sector. USBP designed the OPCEN to improve the effectiveness of air support and to prioritize air support requests across the Rio Grande Valley sector from a central location. USBP modeled the OPCEN after the joint operations and intelligence center in Tucson, Arizona, at which USBP and AMO work together. OPCEN includes the following key roles to improve air support coordination:

- Watch Commander: oversees the operational effectiveness of the OPCEN and is ultimately responsible for operational decisions.
- Zone Coordinator: coordinates USBP agent requests for air support from the stations.
- Air Coordinator: coordinates with AMO the situational requirements for air support.
- AMO Pilot: serves as an air requirement expert in OPCEN.

We did not review OPCEN, but the Rio Grande Valley sector OPCEN appears to be a step toward improving air support and enhancing unity of effort among CBP components. However, because USBP is in the early process of standing up OPCEN, establishing metrics to measure the quality of air support may be warranted.

Recommendation

Recommendation 1: We recommend that the Acting Chief, U.S. Border Patrol, coordinate with the Acting Executive Assistant Commissioner, Air and Marine Operations, to fully implement the joint operations center (OPCEN); establish performance metrics; and evaluate how OPCEN improves air coordination in the Rio Grande Valley sector over the next year.

Management Comments and OIG Analysis

CBP Response to Recommendation #1: Concur. CBP agreed to continue implementation of the OPCEN in the Rio Grande Valley sector. Additionally, CBP will create a joint working group with USBP and AMO to establish performance metrics and evaluate whether the OPCEN improves air coordination in the Rio Grande Valley sector. The estimated completion date is July 31, 2019.

OIG Analysis: CBP's proposed actions meet the intent of the recommendation. We consider the recommendation resolved and open. The recommendation will remain open until we review documentation showing that CBP created the joint



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working group, established performance metrics, and evaluated whether the OPCEN improves air coordination.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The *Homeland Security Act of 2002* (Public Law 107-296) amended the *Inspector General Act of 1978* to establish the DHS OIG.

We initiated this review to determine whether AMO and Coast Guard supported USBP agents at night in the Rio Grande Valley sector. Our scope included FYs 2015–2017.

To answer our objective, we interviewed officials from CBP, USBP, and AMO offices, along with Coast Guard, at its headquarters and in the field. We examined AMO, USBP, and Coast Guard activities to determine the extent of air support in the Rio Grande Valley sector. We accompanied flight missions with AMO and Coast Guard. We observed operations in:

- Tucson, Arizona
- Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Edinberg, Fort Brown, McAllen, and Rio Grande City, Texas

We reviewed flight hour data from the AMO Tasking, Operations, & Management Information System and Coast Guard Assets and Logistics Management Information System. We used the data to corroborate testimonial evidence of Rio Grande Valley sector air support hours.

We conducted this review between August 2017 and January 2018 pursuant to the *Inspector General Act of 1978*, as amended, and according to the *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

The Office of Audits contributors to this report are: Sean Pettersen, Director; Karen Sheen, Audit Manager; Christopher Yablonski, Auditor-in-Charge; Levino Johnson, Program Analyst; Elizabeth Kelleher, Program Analyst; Robert Williams, Program Analyst; Benjamin Wing, Auditor; Kevin Dolloson, Communications Analyst; and Terrell Washington, Independent Reference Reviewer.



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Appendix A
CBP Comments to the Draft Report

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20229



**U.S. Customs and
Border Protection**

September 4, 2018

MEMORANDUM FOR: John V. Kelly
Senior Official Performing the Duties of the
Inspector General
Office of Inspector General

FROM: Henry A. Moak, Jr. *H. Moak, Jr.*
Acting Senior Component Accountable Official
U.S. Customs and Border Protection

SUBJECT: Management Response to Draft Report: "Rio Grande
Valley Sector Air Support"
(Project No. 17-098-AUD-USCG-CBP)

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) appreciates the work of the Office of Inspector General (OIG) in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

CBP is pleased that the OIG confirmed that Air and Marine Operations (AMO) routinely provides the U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) air support in the Rio Grande Valley. The OIG also recognized the USBP's creation of a Joint Operations Center (OPCEN) to coordinate air operations with AMO in the Rio Grande Valley Sector. AMO and USBP are committed to effectively working together to interdict unlawful people and cargo approaching U.S. borders.

The draft report contained one recommendation, with which CBP concurs. Attached find our detailed response to the recommendation. Technical comments were previously provided under separate cover.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Attachment



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Attachment: Management Response to Recommendations Contained in (Project No. 17-098-AUD-USCG-CBP)

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) recommended that the Chief of the U.S. Border Patrol:

Recommendation 1: Coordinate with the Executive Assistant Commissioner, Air and Marine Operations to continue implementing the OPCEN, establish performance metrics, and evaluate whether the OPCEN improves air coordination in the Rio Grande Valley.

Response: Concur. CBP's Offices of U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) and Air and Marine Operations (AMO) will create a joint working group to coordinate the continued implementation of the OPCEN, establish performance metrics and evaluate whether the OPCEN improves air coordination in the Rio Grande Valley. The working group will be comprised of USBP and AMO leadership and subject matter experts. Estimated Completion Date: July 31, 2019.



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Appendix B
FY 2017 Rio Grande Valley Sector Apprehensions, Rescues, and Seizures

Apprehension and Seizure Type	USBP Sector Rank	Rio Grande Valley Sector Data	
		USBP	AMO Contribution
Apprehensions	1st	137,562	14,054
Rescues	1st	1,190	N/A
Marijuana	2nd	260,020 (pounds)	29,612 (pounds)
Cocaine	3rd	1,192 (pounds)	268 (pounds)

Source: USBP FY 2017 Sector Profile and AMO FY 2017 Statistics (Unaudited)



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