

## Man pleads guilty in immigrant smuggling crash case | Six died in wrong-way collision on I-8 in June

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### Document Text

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A Mexican field worker pleaded guilty yesterday for his role in a wrong-way collision on Interstate 8 that ended with the death of six people.

The June 24 crash near Pine Valley was part of a rash of incidents involving smugglers speeding on the wrong side of the road, often with their vehicles' headlights off.

Alfredo Alvarez Coronado, 25, admitted he was one of the guides who led at least 20 immigrants across the border and into a waiting van.

After side-swiping two cars on the freeway, the van crashed into a sport utility vehicle driven by Larry S. Baca, 50, a New Mexico resident. Baca died at the scene. Five people in the van -- four from Mexico and one from Brazil -- also died.

Alvarez, who has scars on his face from the accident, is the only smuggler charged in the incident. The van's driver died, and investigators are still searching for other suspects.

Federal authorities believe at least two smuggling groups have been training their drivers to travel the wrong way on California freeways. Some also fill their vehicles' tires with silicone gel to withstand spike strips.

The smugglers may be trying new tactics because of increased security measures at the ports of entry.

"Years ago, you would never hear of an alien smuggler going the wrong way down a highway with his lights turned off," said Sherri Walker Hobson, the federal prosecutor who handled Alvarez's case. "Now, smugglers are disregarding the danger and bringing people across at any cost."

Six months ago, most of the drivers using the method were smuggling illegal immigrants. But federal officials said the more recent cases have involved drug smuggling.

On Tuesday, a 19-year-old man from Mexico led Highway Patrol officers on a 45-mile chase on Interstate 8 into El Cajon. Twice during the chase, the driver drove the wrong way on the highway, accelerating at times to 105 mph. He was arrested on charges of evading arrest and drug possession.

In another recent incident, two men on motorcycles sped into the United States through the southbound lane at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. They escaped on foot after ditching their motorcycles near the border. Authorities believe they

were smuggling drugs.

To intercept wrong-way drivers, the Border Patrol has stationed agents on the southbound side of the port of entry.

However, the steel spikes that are supposed to pop up and stop drivers have been welded shut on orders from Mexican Customs officials. They said motorists complained the spikes, which are on the Mexican side of the border, were shredding their tires as they drove legally into Tijuana.

Mexican and U.S. officials say they have worked out a compromise to get the spikes working again.

Authorities began investigating Alvarez for the I-8 crash after a Border Patrol agent at the accident scene thought he had seen Alvarez before. Two immigrants who survived the crash later identified him as the guide who had helped them cross into the United States.

The immigrants told officials they each paid between \$1,300 and \$1,500 to be smuggled across the border.

On that same night, Border Patrol agents spotted another van traveling the wrong way on the interstate. They later found the van near a Chula Vista motel and saw illegal immigrants being loaded inside. The agents detained one immigrant, who said the group was headed to Los Angeles.

Alvarez, who faces at least three years in prison for immigrant smuggling, told Border Patrol agents he had worked for the smuggling organization for only a month. He agreed to be a guide because he was working off his own \$300 smuggling fee, said his attorney, Michael Crowley.

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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