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# Border Fence Could Spell Environmental Disaster

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NEW YORK, Oct 2 (OneWorld) - Environmental groups are concerned about a new plan to build a 700-mile long fence along the border with Mexico.

The official plan, as envisaged in a legislative bill on immigration reforms, is meant to stop the flow of undocumented workers from Mexico, but scientists say it will bring nothing but disaster for the biological diversity of the region.

"The only living things the walls won't stop are people," said Michael Finkelstein, executive director at the Tuscan, Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement.

Finkelstein and other independent experts fear that the proposed fence will restrict the movement of wildlife and disturb the unique and fragile ecology of the region.

The border area is home to many endangered species of plants, birds and animals, such as owls, parrots, jaguars, wolves, bears, and lions, that often need to move around as an essential element of their survival.

According to experts on biological diversity, some jaguars found in Arizona come from Mexico.

Similarly, "Mexican Gray Wolves, Peninsular Bighorn Sheep, and other endangered species need to cross their borderland habitat often," said Finkelstein, "and this wall will crush their ability to survive."

The 2,000-mile long U.S.-Mexican border region is considered an extraordinary source of biological diversity because it is shaped by a variety of ecological forms, including deserts, mangrove forests, plains, mountains, river valleys, and wetlands.

The Senate approved the legislation on Friday and now it awaits only a signature from President George W. Bush.

The proposal seeks to construct a series of barriers separated by an access road for patrol vehicles on long stretches of the border in California, Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico.

The immigration bill passed by the House does not provide funding for the fence, but Republicans have suggested it would cost around \$2 billion. Democrats estimate that it would cost no less than \$7 billion.

Supporters of the fence plan say it would enhance border protection from illegal immigrants crossing from Mexico and provide security against its possible use by terrorists.

"We have to come to grips with the facts that our border patrol agents need a fence on our southern border where we are now facing infiltration by members of terrorist organizations like Hezbollah," said Rep. Ed Royce, a California Republican, in a recent statement.

For their part, Democrats have charged the Republicans with trying to use the immigration issue to attract votes in the upcoming Congressional elections.

They are trying to confuse Americans into thinking "Osama bin Laden is heading north in sombrero," said Texas Democrat Lloyd Doggett.

The proposed legislation allows the Department of Homeland Security to take charge of the border in 18 months and gives additional powers to the border security force agents, besides calling for a study on the need for a fence along the U.S.-Canada border.

About 1 million undocumented workers from Mexico are believed to have crossed the border last year.

Even before the bill has been signed into law, the Department of Homeland Security has awarded a contract to the Boeing Corporation to develop sensors, cameras, and other equipment to control the U.S.-Mexican border.

Those who failed to win the contract include giant corporations such as Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, and Ericsson.

