

## Homeland Security expedites border wall project

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SANTA TERESA – The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has issued waivers of environmental and other laws, expediting the construction of “new bollard wall” in New Mexico and Arizona.

The barriers are needed to help “impede and deny illegal border crossings and the drug and human smuggling activities of transnational criminal organizations,” according to a statement released Friday by Homeland Security.

The construction projects cover 53 miles, with most of the wall going up in New Mexico in Doña Ana and Luna counties. The new bollard wall would replace “dilapidated and outdated designs, in addition to road construction and improvement and lighting installation,” according to Homeland Security.

The new section of bollard wall will extend the existing structure 20 miles west of the Santa Teresa Port of Entry through the rest of Doña Ana County into Luna County and about four miles west past the Columbus Port of Entry.

The waivers published in the Federal Register on Wednesday clear the way for construction because the Department of Homeland Security does not have to comply with laws involving public lands, water and wildlife.

“The waiving of these laws sends a clear message to our border communities that our rights and our voices do not matter,” said Amanda Munro, field organizer for the Southwest Environmental Center.

The Las Cruces-based conservation organization said the waivers cover 27 laws ranging from those affecting endangered species to archaeological and historic preservation.

“These laws are intended to protect people from bad decisions that will negatively impact their environment, health and history, and yet we border residents are deemed unworthy of even the right to give our opinion on the construction happening in our own backyards,” Munro said.

The Southwest Environmental Center is among 22 organizations that sent a letter Thursday asking Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan and Border Patrol Chief Carla Provost for a 30-day extension to the comment period in Doña Ana and Luna counties.

The letter points out that CBP issued a \$789 million construction contract for the New Mexico project one day after the comment period began.

Others who submitted the letter include the Indivisible Tohono, a border tribal organization; the National Parks Conservation Association; and the Center for Biological Diversity.

“This wall will destroy New Mexico’s incredible public lands and hurt the local economy, which relies on the outdoor industry. And it could deal a death blow to Mexican gray wolves in the U.S.,” said Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity.

But some New Mexico farmers and ranchers on the border support building a wall in New Mexico and want it done quickly.

“We’re pleased that the government recognizes the urgency of the situation,” said Caren Cowan, executive director of New Mexico Cattle Growers and Wool Growers associations.

Cowan said she is not concerned about the waivers being used to expedite the building of the wall. “Our members deserve protection, and this is a step in that right direction, and we greatly appreciate it,” she said.

President Donald Trump declared a national emergency after Congress refused to approve the \$5.7 billion he wanted to pay for his promised border wall. The president is diverting up to \$1 billion in Department of Defense funds to add barriers in New Mexico and Arizona.

“It’s bad enough that Trump’s bulldozing the borderlands for a senseless wall, but now he’s stealing money from the military to do it,” Jordahl said.

Construction on the wall in New Mexico is expected to begin next month, despite multiple lawsuits.

“The only thing permanent about Trump’s wall will be the destruction to wildlife and wild places,” Jordahl said. “It will do nothing to stop asylum seekers or illegal drug smugglers. Waiving these laws is an affront to borderland communities, and we’ll continue to challenge this in court.”