

# 'That is how you cause extinction': Border wall threatens desert ecology, conservationists say

**Lauren Villagran** Published 12:20 p.m. MT Oct. 11, 2019 | Updated 2:02 p.m. MT Oct. 11, 2019

Construction of a [border wall as tall as a two-story house is creeping across the New Mexico desert](#) at a rate of 200 feet a day, through one of the most biologically diverse landscapes in North America.

Environment advocates say the new 30-foot steel barrier — the first of its kind in New Mexico — could keep out more than just people as it represents a significant threat to vulnerable Chihuahuan desert species, including bobcats and mountain lions.

"That is how you cause extinction," said Kevin Bixby, director of the Southwest Environmental Center in Las Cruces. "You fragment habitat."

A barrier that blocks movement across a landscape can divide animal populations, and "the smaller a population is, the more vulnerable it is to disappearing, through a number of factors like disease or catastrophe or inbreeding," Bixby said. "It's death by a thousand cuts."

U.S. Rep. Adam Smith, center, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, is given details about border fence construction by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regional business director John Moreno on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019, in New Mexico. The border fence section is being built in rural Southern New Mexico between Santa Teresa and Columbus. BRIANA SANCHEZ/EL PASO TIMES

The Center, in 2018, positioned [cameras near the borderline](#) in southern New Mexico to capture the diversity of wildlife. Bobcats, mountain lions, birds, badgers and other critters can be seen in the day and night, defying those who would call the desert landscape "barren."

About 25 miles west of the Santa Teresa port of entry, the Army Corps of Engineers was working this week to lift towering panels of steel at the borderline. The new fence will extend 46 miles to the [Columbus port of entry](#), effectively walling off all of Doña Ana County and much of Luna County from the landscape in Mexico's northern Chihuahua state.

In a statement, the Army Corps said "no wildlife passages have yet to be identified as needed," in the 46-mile project. For additional wall projects being planned for New Mexico, the Army Corps

said that "small wildlife passages might be needed due to their close proximity to the wilderness area" in the state's southwest corner.

As the border barrier walls off more habitat through New Mexico and Arizona, conservationists worry about the endangered species, including the jaguar and Mexican gray wolf, whose severely limited populations exist on both sides of the border and need to connect. Wall projects are also slated for their habitat, in New Mexico's southwest corner.

Other species with low population densities in the desert such as mule deer and pronghorn antelope, although not yet threatened, could be affected as the barrier slices through their habitat.

John Moreno, left, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regional business director, and Guillermo Provencio, right, resident engineer of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, talk about the construction of the new border fence during U.S. Reps. Adam Smith and Veronica Escobar's tour of the construction site Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019, in New Mexico. It is being built in rural Southern New Mexico between Santa Teresa and Columbus. (Photo: BRIANA SANCHEZ/EL PASO TIMES)

"Mountain lions, bobcats, ring tail cats, badgers — all these animals have to have larger home ranges to meet their needs for food," said Michael Robinson, senior conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity in New Mexico. "When you cut their ranges, it fragments the populations and you can have the beginnings of long-term genetic problems. We don't know what's going to happen 30 years from now."

## Environmental protections waived for wall

The Department of Homeland Security has waived 51 clean land, air, water and other wilderness-protection statutes to facilitate construction of the border wall since 2017, according to Kenneth Madsen, an associate professor of geography at Ohio State University who has been tracking border wall construction for decades.

"The public has less input when those laws are waived," Madsen said. "It's not something that can be easily undone."

The Bush administration also waived numerous U.S. statutes to erect border barriers; there was no new border wall funding approved under Obama.

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Construction site of a new border fence being built in rural Southern New Mexico between Santa Teresa and Columbus, N.M., South of Highway 9 Tuesday, Oct. 8, in N.M. (Photo: BRIANA SANCHEZ / EL PASO TIMES)

Several lawsuits against President Donald Trump — including one led by the Sierra Club and another by El Paso County — have [challenged the President's declaration of a national emergency at the border](#).

The February declaration underpins the administration's diversion of \$6.1 billion in funding appropriated to the Department of Defense for other purposes, including \$2.5 billion earmarked for counter-narcotics operations and [\\$3.6 billion tagged for military construction projects](#).

The 30-foot Bollard-style fence in New Mexico is being paid for with the counter-narcotics money. In total, the \$2.5 billion is being used to build up to 129 miles of wall in southern New Mexico, Arizona and California.

If all 129 miles are built, the bill would come to \$19.4 million a mile for the 30-foot barrier — nearly double the cost of an \$11 million, mile-long, 18-foot fence erected near Sunland Park, New Mexico, in 2016. Both projects include an all-weather road, fiber-optic lighting and cameras, according to Border Patrol El Paso sector spokesman Ramiro Cordero.

Cordero said the new, taller barrier is needed in the area that spans New Mexico's Luna and Doña Ana counties, due to increased illegal traffic of both migrants and drug smugglers near [Highway 9](#), which connects West Texas and Arizona across New Mexico.

"It's always been a challenge because there are areas along Highway 9 that are extremely close to the international boundary," he said. "So if they are able to avoid our technology, they can get to Highway 9 quickly and mingle with the rest of the traffic."

But the risk to the landscape and those animals and humans who depend on it is too great, said Fernando Clemente, a wildlife biologist who works with ranchers in New Mexico and Chihuahua to preserve the health of their grazing lands for cattle and native wildlife.

The Chihuahuan desert spans 200,000 square miles, but "unfortunately, more than 60% of this desert lies south of the international border, which is very critical to the sustainability of 30% of the New Mexican desert habitats," Clemente said in a letter to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The other 10% of Chihuahuan desert lies in Texas.

"A physical barrier along New Mexico's southern border could be devastating for habitat, wildlife populations, watersheds, private properties and the local economy in the United States and Mexico, preventing or discouraging wildlife from accessing water, food or other critical resources and limiting the income of those who make their living working with wildlife," he wrote.

## **Why build the wall in New Mexico?**

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regional business director John Moreno, center, gives U.S. Rep. Adam Smith, right, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and U.S. Rep. Veronica Escobar, not shown, details about border fence construction Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019, in Southern New Mexico. The border fence is being built in rural Southern New Mexico between Santa Teresa and Columbus, south of Highway 9. (Photo: BRIANA SANCHEZ/EL PASO TIMES)

New Mexico was low-hanging fruit for an administration bent on building the border wall to fulfill Trump's oft-repeated campaign promise.

Unlike in south Texas — where private landowners control much of the borderland and have protested the taking of it by eminent domain — a strip of borderland in New Mexico known as the Roosevelt easement gives the federal government free rein.

All along that 60-foot-wide ribbon of the land that runs the length of New Mexico, the administration doesn't have to negotiate with land holders or states to build the wall.

The Department of Interior, which is responsible for the Roosevelt easement, transferred ownership to the Department of Defense for three years. In order to use the DOD funding to pay for the wall, the DOD then declared the border fence a "military installation," according to the Army Corps.

"The impacts of this crisis are vast and must be aggressively addressed with extraordinary measures," said Interior Secretary David Bernhardt in a statement following the transfer last month.

The wall can't easily be undone, and the Sierra Club initially won an injunction preventing its construction while its case against the Trump administration proceeds through the courts. But the Supreme Court in July lifted the injunction, allowing construction to move forward.

A federal judge in the El Paso litigation [ruled Friday](#) that the administration's national emergency declaration violates federal law. That judgment and the decision in the Sierra Club case could determine whether construction continues to move forward.

A judge in 9th Circuit Court of Appeals is expected to rule on the Sierra Club lawsuit in mid-November;

Construction of the 46-mile stretch in New Mexico began in August and is slated to be complete in October next year.

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