

Video shows groundwater drilling near sensitive spring as border wall construction continues

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-environment/2019/12/21/groundwater-drilling-border-wall-could-impact-quitobaquito-springs/2710335001/>

[Erin Stone](#), Arizona Republic Published 7:00 a.m. MT Dec. 21, 2019

Rosemary Schiano drove down a remote road on the US-Mexico border in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument earlier this week, along one of the most pristine stretches of the Sonoran Desert.

But the wildlife biologist was not there to observe the variety of cactuses or the other native plants and animals that call this wilderness home. She was showing several colleagues a less serene sight: trucks hauling loads of 30-foot steel bollards under the mile and a half or so of border wall fencing already erected at the edge of this reserve.

But what alarmed them more was a crew working on a well at the site.

Several miles beyond the bustling construction is Quitobaquito Springs, the only reliable source of water in this part of the Sonoran Desert.

The large pond, about 150 miles southwest of Phoenix, is home to two native endangered species and is an oasis for countless desert wildlife. The spring is a sacred site for the Hia-Ced O'odham and Tohono O'odham nations and has been used by their ancestors for thousands of years.

Conservationists say the border wall jeopardizes not only cross-border access for wildlife, but also the spring's very existence.

On December 16, Schiano and her fellow observers spotted a crew of workers drilling for groundwater about eight miles east of the spring. They estimated the distance based on GPS coordinates Schiano collected on scene.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, concerned about depleting the aquifer that feeds the spring, advised in its recommendations for wall construction that crews not drill any wells within 5 miles to the west and 10 miles to the east of Quitobaquito Springs.

In the 1990s, the U.S. Geological Survey [studied the area](#) to understand how groundwater drilling on the Mexican side of the border may impact Quitobaquito Springs. They found the spring relies on groundwater flow that occurs within a 25 square mile radius, and is partially fed by a groundwater basin under the adjacent La Abra Plain, which encompasses approximately 100 square miles.

“(The Department of Homeland Security) is mining our precious groundwater to build the #BorderWall,” tweeted Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity. Schiona shared the video of the drillers with the conservation group.

The Republic contacted the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the agency that oversees border security, and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, which awarded the multimillion dollar border wall contract to Southwest Valley Constructors, a subsidiary of Omaha-based firm Kiewit. Neither agency responded to initial requests to confirm whether the drilling crew was related to the border construction.

The National Park Service, which oversees Organ Pipe, referred The Republic to those agencies in response to questions about the new drilling.

In September, CBP confirmed in a statement to The Republic that it is working with other federal agencies and the contractor to pump groundwater from wells located within Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and using it for construction, but said new wells had not been drilled.

Water is used for mixing concrete and keeping dust down, among other things, for construction. In that part of the state in particular, the resource is hard to come by.

The holding pond at Quitobaquito Springs, a desert oasis 13 miles east of Lukeville, Arizona, is man-made, but the natural spring that feeds it is believed to have sustained life for thousands of years. (Photo: Rafael Carranza/The Republic)

“That oasis is literally the only surface water in this entire region of Arizona,” Schiona told The Republic. “There’s not an infinite amount of water here—this is the driest region of Arizona. Climate change is making it more dry. There is a chance if they keep moving a lot of water that Quitobaquito could start drying up. That would be devastating to not only endangered species, but all the other species that use it. If Quitobaquito isn’t here, the animals aren’t here.”

The spring is the entire universe for the endangered Quitobaquito pupfish. The small fish have adapted to be able to survive in water temperatures in excess of 110 degrees. Males turn a vibrant blue to impress mates.

The Sonoyta mud turtle, also endangered, lives only in the spring and nearby Rio Sonoyta in Sonora, Mexico. Peregrine falcons, which can be seen in Organ Pipe, reside in the area because of the spring, Schiona said.

The presence of an endangered species would normally delay or possibly halt major construction. Environmental and cultural assessments are typically required for major public projects because of 40-plus federal laws in place.

But in 2005, Congress granted then-President George W. Bush the authority to bypass those federal environmental and cultural protection laws to expedite border wall construction on the California-Mexico border. The authority wasn't restricted to that specific time and place and, the Trump Administration [has used that same waiver](#) authority to accelerate the current border wall construction.

"This would never, ever be legal if normal laws were in place," said Jordahl. "It's allowing unmitigated, completely unaccountable groundwater pumping in refuges that have sensitive aquatic resources. The survival of these species in the desert is so miraculous and it's just heartbreaking to think that we could lose them because of this needless project."

The site is culturally significant as well. The Tohono O'Odham stop in the area during their sacred salt pilgrimage from Arizona to Sonora, Mexico. In a resolution passed in June, tribal leaders formally opposed CBP plans to build the 43 miles of bollard fencing through their traditional lands, including Quitobaquito.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the Trump Administration over the waiver authority and lost twice. They are currently in the process of appealing to the Supreme Court. Pima County and the city of Tucson recently voted to file amici briefs in the case.

Meanwhile the construction continues. "Nobody knows how to stop this thing," Schiona said. "People are very concerned."