

Border Wall Construction In Arizona Bulldozes Cactus Columns

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President Trump's border wall is going up between Arizona and Mexico, and it's generating controversy because of its proximity to the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Native Americans lands.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

In Arizona, a border wall is now going up between the United States and Mexico, and conservationists are furious. President Trump's wall will skirt one of the most beloved areas in the Southwest, the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. It has been recognized by the United Nations as an international biosphere reserve. What's more - Native Americans who live along the border say the wall will disrupt their traditions. Here's NPR's John Burnett.

JOHN BURNETT, BYLINE: On a recent drive along Arizona's southern border, I watched a crew transplanting saguaro cactus out of the zone with they're about to build the wall. This is from an Army Corps of Engineers video.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: There may be misconceptions that we are on a construction site and just not caring for the environment, just proceeding with work as planned. We are relocating saguaro, organ pipe, ocotillo...

BURNETT: But a half-mile away, I drove up on a big yellow bulldozer scraping the desert clean and mowing down cactus columns that are likely older than the young man operating the dozer. Customs and Border Protection later said they don't save unhealthy plants like these. This scene illustrates why environmentalists are deeply skeptical of the government's plans. They fear that Customs and Border Protection and the Department of Defense, as they race to meet the president's deadline of 450 miles of wall by the elections in 2020, will plow through one of the most biologically and culturally rich regions of the continental United States.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has warned that the wall could negatively impact 23 endangered and at-risk species, including the Sonoran pronghorn antelope, and the National Park Service says construction could destroy 22 archeological sites. Yet for this stretch of western desert, the government has waived 41 federal environmental laws to expedite construction.

KEVIN DAHL: This is a wall to fulfill a campaign promise. It's really clear. And that's what makes many of us so angry that's being done so fast outside the rule of law. And we know that it'll have incredible impacts.

BURNETT: Kevin Dahl is the Arizona representative for the National Parks Conservation Association, a nonprofit. We're sitting beside a serene spring-fed pond fringed by cat tails and dive-bombed by dragonflies.

It's called Quitobaquito Springs inside the organ pipe cactus refuge. A biologist peers into a rivulet that feeds this oasis in the middle of the Sonoran Desert.

JEFF SORENSEN: These guys are very tiny, maybe half the size of a sesame seed. Those are the Quitobaquito tryonia. And there are literally thousands in here.

BURNETT: Jeff Sorensen is with Arizona Game & Fish. He's an expert on this tiny snail. It's one of three species, along with a mud turtle and a pupfish, whose entire universe is this wetland. But the pond is a stone's throw from the international border and the path of the wall. Conservationists fear that workers will drill water wells to make concrete and lower the water table, which has been dropping for years.

SORENSEN: We do have concerns. Our species that are at this site rely on water, just like everything else here in this desert Southwest. And to take that water away from them means less of a home.

BURNETT: The Trump administration is building 63 miles of wall on the Arizona border to replace rundown pedestrian fences and vehicle barriers. CBP says this stretch of desert is a busy drug and human trafficking corridor. It's erecting new 18 to 30-foot-tall concrete-filled steel bollards, along with security lights and an all-weather patrol road. It'll cost more than \$10 million a mile. In responses to questions from NPR, the agency says contractors will not drill for water within five miles of Quitobaquito Springs. The agency says it is in regular contact with federal environmental officials, and it is doing its utmost to reduce impacts to the natural world. Critics are not appeased.

LAIKEN JORDAHL: There is a whole new level of recklessness that we are seeing under Trump. I mean, we thought Bush was bad, but this is a whole nother order of magnitude.

BURNETT: Laiken Jordahl is an borderlands activist with the Center for Biological Diversity. There was an outcry, too, back in the late 2000s when President George W. Bush built the first generation of bollard wall. Those barriers topped out at 18 feet. The massive structure rising southwest of Tucson is nearly twice as tall. It looks like it could hold back a herd of T. Rex's.

JOHN LADD: I support Donald Trump 100%. If you're going to build a wall, build it.

BURNETT: John Ladd's family has bred cattle in Arizona since it was a territory. Their ranch backs up to the Mexican border. The surrounding mountains purple at dusk, as a bull scratches his haunches on a yucca. Time was when the Ladd ranch was overrun by unauthorized crossers. They stole things and cut fences. Then in 2016, at the end of the Obama years, CBP built a fence continuing what Bush started. John Ladd reserves judgment on a wall through a federally protected wilderness. But for his ranch, walls worked.

LADD: When this 18-foot wall went in, it was obvious that immigrants quit coming through here. It was an immediate improvement with the security of our border as well as our houses.

BURNETT: Other border neighbors feel differently. The vast Tohono O'odham Nation shares 62 miles with Mexico. They vehemently oppose the border wall. Several thousand tribal members live south of the border, and they can pass back and forth without passports. Already, the barriers are encroaching on tribal lands from both sides. While there is currently no funding to wall off the reservation from Mexico, tribal members fear that CBP could change its mind. Tribal chairman Ned Norris Jr.

NED NORRIS JR: We have lived in this area forever, and so a full blown out 30-foot wall would make it that much more difficult for our tribal citizens in Mexico and in the U.S. to be able to actively participate with family gatherings, with ceremonial gatherings.

BURNETT: Traditions are important to the Antone family. I met them recently walking westward along the state highway that runs through the reservation. They were on a pilgrimage for St. Francis. Eighteen-year-old Genae Antone (ph) talked about another rite of passage that's vital to young Tohono O'odham men. They travel on foot, the round trip of 300 miles, from the reservation across the border to the salt flats at Mexico's Sea of Cortez.

GENAE ANTONE: The salt run for the men, that's really important for us as Tohono O'odham, you know, for the men to go run and run all the way to the water to get salt. Some people go and get seashells. So I don't really necessarily think it's a good idea.

BURNETT: The Antone family, carrying a feathered walking stick, a statue of the Virgin and an American flag, then continue on their pilgrimage. John Burnett, NPR News, Tucson.