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# Bernhardt: Trump's barrier creates 'environmental benefits'

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Interior Secretary David Bernhardt last night derided environmental activists who have sought to block the Trump administration's border wall expansion, asserting that new barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border contribute to "habitat restoration."

Bernhardt made the remarks in a brief [interview](#) with Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

"Common sense says when you have tremendous trafficking, ad hoc trails, trash, debris and fires, you have a lot of damage to native vegetation, wildlife and to the ecosystem," Bernhardt said.

He later touted his own visits to the southern border region, where the Interior Department manages about 40% of the 2,000-mile boundary across California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

"I went down and personally inspected a number of sites on the border, and the reality was that where we put a wall, we have habitat restoration taking place, environmental flora and fauna [have] begun to come back instead of it being trampled," Bernhardt said. "The reality is the wall will provide additional environmental benefits, and that is simply a fact."

Environmental groups have repeatedly challenged border wall construction, arguing against federal laws that permit the waiver of statutes like the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act and saying that the barriers cause floods and cut off wildlife corridors, among other issues ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 5).

Bernhardt also accused opponents of border construction of failing to visit the region themselves.

"The reality is that they have not been on the ground and seen the tremendous devastation, because anybody that has walks away with a recognition that we need to have commonsense solutions, solutions that are real and solutions that will lead to results," Bernhardt said, before praising President Trump.

"Fortunately, we have a president who is willing to say I want to bring the power of government to stop insanity, and we are trying," he said.

Interior oversees more than 25 million acres of public lands within 100 miles of the boundary line, including six wildlife refuges, lands held in trust for four tribes, a half-dozen national parks and Bureau of Land Management districts.

Center for Biological Diversity borderlands campaigner Laiken Jordahl, who has extensively observed and documented construction on the border, labeled the new barriers "an environmental and humanitarian catastrophe."

"Bernhardt is either lying or ignoring the facts to push Trump's disgraceful racist, anti-environment agenda," Jordahl added. "A real Interior secretary would be working alongside conservationists, who've spent their lives protecting our spectacular borderlands. Instead, Bernhardt is denigrating them and greenlighting destruction of protected public lands. He should be ashamed of himself."

During the interview, Bernhardt also endorsed assertions that individuals crossing the border illegally have caused fires, and he criticized environmentalists for not holding immigrants entering the country illegally accountable.

"The reality is those people that claim to be the most opposed to the wall also claim to be the most pro-environmental supporters out there, and this just doesn't fit with their narrative," he said, later adding: "We have wilderness areas that have essentially been destroyed by illegal activity."

An Interior spokeswoman did not immediately respond to a request for details about Bernhardt's allegations.

But in October, acting BLM Director William Perry Pendley made similar claims after visiting the southwest border region.

"Illegal crossings are destroying our wilderness areas with unlawful fires, trash, foot traffic and trails," Pendley said.

According to a BLM spokesman who discussed Pendley's remarks at that time, the top BLM official was speaking about incidents in the Otay Mountain Wilderness area in California.

As of October, the region had seen seven fires believed to have stemmed from cooking or signal fires. The largest of those fires were recorded burning 30 acres, nearly 28 acres and 16 acres. The other incidents were nominal.

In September, Bernhardt issued an unprecedented withdrawal of 560 acres of public lands to speed Trump's border wall effort. The move handed the Department of the Army administrative control of the area for three years ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 19).