

Border wall nearly finished in Arizona as Biden pushes pause

- [Curt Prendergast](#). Jan 24, 2021 Updated 16 hrs ago
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- https://tucson.com/news/local/border-wall-nearly-finished-in-arizona-as-biden-pushes-pause/article_4d007c23-e0e4-5628-9b5a-3daeda0b0305.html

The crews that spent more than a year hustling to build as much border wall as possible in Southern Arizona stopped working last week, at least in some places, after President Biden ordered a construction pause.

As a candidate, Biden promised “there will not be another foot” of border wall built during his administration. Hours after his inauguration on Wednesday, Biden directed federal officials to “pause work on each construction project on the southern border wall” as soon as possible and no later than seven days after his proclamation.

The Army Corps of Engineers directed contractors “not to install any additional physical barriers” along the border, according to a statement from the Corps on Thursday. Contractors were prohibited from doing any work except for what is “necessary to safely prepare each site for a suspension of work.”

While critics of the wall applauded Biden’s order and reported work stoppages from various parts of Arizona’s border with Mexico, their cheers came after the Trump administration built nearly all the 245 miles of wall planned for Arizona’s border with Mexico. And construction could start again after the Biden administration’s 60-day review of wall projects.

The wall consists of 30-foot-tall steel bollards filled with concrete. The bollards are 6 inches wide and separated from each other by 4 inches of space, which allows Border Patrol agents to see activity on the Mexico side of the border. The wall is topped with

anti-climbing plates, and the foundation extends 6 to 10 feet underground to thwart tunneling.

“NOT A SERIOUS POLICY SOLUTION”

In his order Wednesday, Biden said “building a massive wall that spans the entire southern border is not a serious policy solution. It is a waste of money that diverts attention from genuine threats to our homeland security.”

Former President Donald Trump told crowds at rallies that the wall was “like magic.” Border Patrol officials have said the wall will help slow down attempts to cross the border illegally and allow agents to cover more ground during their shifts. Agents have told the Star the roads that are part of the wall projects will help them quickly respond to incidents at the border.

“It stopped most older people and most younger kids. When they walk up and they see a 30-foot-high wall, it stops them,” Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott told the Star last fall. “It doesn’t always stop the 22-year-old. It doesn’t always stop the super-agile. But you know what? Now it’s one (person),” instead of large groups crossing together.

Last week, Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, a Democrat whose district includes part of the Arizona-Mexico border, said the wall “has always been a vanity project and campaign chant rather than an effective security infrastructure project.”

Since 2019, the Corps awarded \$4.8 billion worth of contracts, paid for with Defense Department funds, to build 222 miles of wall in Arizona. Another 23 miles of wall projects in Arizona were funded by other means, including Congressional appropriations.

As of Jan. 15, contractors installed 226 miles of bollards on the Arizona border, according to Customs and Border Protection, leaving less than 20 miles still under construction. The Corps’ list of wall projects showed the installation of bollards was

not complete as of early last week in areas near Sasabe, Nogales, Naco, the southeastern corner of Cochise County and a small area near Yuma.

Beyond the steel bollards, the installation of sensors, lights, cameras and roads, which make up what federal officials often call the “border wall system,” is not expected to be complete for any project in Arizona until the summer at the earliest, according to the Corps.

SHUT DOWN OR WRAP-UP?

After Biden issued his proclamation, local residents and environmental advocates rushed to the border to ensure contractors were complying.

Construction activity was shut down on Thursday, said Myles Traphagen, borderlands project coordinator for the Wildlands Network, who headed to a 4-mile wall project east of Nogales. No bollards had been installed yet in that project, he said.

John Kurc, a photographer who has spent months documenting the wall project in Guadalupe Canyon in the southeastern corner of Cochise County, particularly the blasting of rock at construction sites, said the last blast he saw was on Wednesday morning.

Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner at the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity and longtime critic of the wall, posted a video on Friday of a wall project across the San Pedro River in Cochise County showing contractors had vacated the area.

Jordahl later posted a video showing activity at a wall construction site on the Coronado Memorial, a mountainous area a few miles west of the San Pedro River. Kurc said he saw “earthmovers all over the west side” of the memorial on Friday.

On Saturday morning, Melissa Owen, who lives near Sasabe, flew in a helicopter over nearby wall construction sites. As of 8:40 a.m. on Saturday, “they were actively

carving through the mountains,” Owen said. She could not see any bollards being installed, but other construction work appeared to be continuing “as usual” with trucks, bulldozers, excavators and water trucks operating both to the east and west of Sasabe, she said.

The Star reached out to the Corps to clarify whether the work was normal wrap-up work at a construction site, which the Biden proclamation appeared to allow, or some sort of attempt to defy Biden’s order. Corps spokesman Jay Field reiterated a portion of the Corps’ statement from Thursday saying the only work that would be done over the next few days would be to prepare sites for the suspension of work.

“We are not installing any additional physical barriers,” Field said.

The owner of the contracting company building the wall near Sasabe did not respond to an inquiry from the Star on Saturday morning.

PROJECT REVIEW COMING

In addition to pausing construction, Biden’s order also ended the national emergency Trump declared in February 2019, which was used to divert roughly \$10 billion from the Defense Department to wall construction. Another \$5 billion came from congressional appropriations, according to CBP.

During the pause, Biden administration officials will conduct a “careful review of all resources appropriated or redirected to construct a southern border wall.” He directed officials to assess the “legality of the funding and contracting methods used to construct the wall.”

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments next month about the legality of diverting Defense Department funds after Congress denied the bulk of the Trump administration’s request for wall funding.

Officials can make exceptions to the pause in construction “to avert immediate physical dangers” or to ensure that funds appropriated by Congress “fulfill their intended purpose,” according to Biden’s proclamation.

Officials will develop a plan for the “redirection” of wall funding within 60 days. They must then “take all appropriate steps to resume, modify or terminate projects and to otherwise implement the plan.”

The financial cost of canceling the contracts is not yet clear. The Associated Press quoted a Senate aide as saying fees would be negotiated with contractors, and the administration would seek to spend whatever’s left on related uses on the border, such as roads, lights, sensors and other technology.

Dinah Bear, a Tucson resident who worked for Democrat and Republican administrations for many years on environmental law and policy, said her “immediate focus” was on making sure contractors comply with Biden’s order.