

Wildlife, rights coalition asks Biden to remove miles of Arizona's border wall

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By Mandy Loader For the Arizona Daily Star, Feb 27, 2021

In the weeks since President Biden paused border wall construction, a broad coalition of advocacy groups in Southern Arizona and across the nation wasted no time letting him know exactly where they want him to tear it down.

A coalition of nearly 70 environmental groups, civil-rights organizations and tribal entities sent a report last week to lawmakers and Biden administration officials asking for 59 miles of 30-foot-tall border wall in Arizona to be removed, along with sections of wall elsewhere along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Their request came as administration officials are in the middle of a 60-day evaluation of wall projects. Advocates with the No Border Wall coalition hope the report, which focuses on key wildlife corridors, such as the San Pedro River and the Coronado National Forest, will spur officials to adopt a more comprehensive plan for the wall that would include immediately canceling contracts.

“It’s been so heartbreaking to watch the wall rip across Arizona the last year and a half,” said Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

“It’s so difficult to pick out specific locations where we feel the wall needs to come down, because the right thing to do would be to tear it down everywhere,” he said.

But at the same time, “we have to be practical and strategic,” he added.

BUILT ON FEDERALLY PROTECTED LAND

The coalition is asking the Biden administration to use the rest of the border wall funds to take down wall sections that block 10 key Arizona wildlife corridors. In all, contractors built more than 220 miles of wall in Arizona.

The border wall is made of 30-foot-tall steel bollards filled with concrete. Each bollard is 6 inches wide and spaced 4 inches apart. It is topped with anti-climbing steel plates. Advocates say the spaces between the bollards won’t allow large animals, such as mountain lions and deer, to cross the border. The wall has some 8.5-inch-by-11-inch openings that allow smaller animals, such as rabbits, to cross.

Some of the sections are small. One of the shortest sections spans 1.8 miles at the San Pedro River in Cochise County. The river area is a regular habitat or migratory stop for nearly half of North America’s bird species including the endangered Mexican spotted owl and southwestern willow flycatcher, according to the coalition’s report. It is also home to an “unmatched” community of more than 90 species of mammals such as the jaguar, ocelot and Mexican gray wolf, and 80 species of reptiles and amphibians.

Before construction began, the only barriers in the roughly 500-foot-wide riverbed were strands of barbed wire and removable vehicle barriers. Now, the 30-foot-tall wall crosses the riverbed and is flanked by a vehicle bridge.



Eleanor Ortega fills a gourd with water from Quitobaquito Springs before a tribal ceremony at Organ Pipe National Monument, on Sept. 27, 2020.

Josh Galemore / Arizona Daily Star

One of the longest wall sections in the report runs along 7 miles of the border near Quitobaquito Springs on Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. The report describes the area as a sacred place with “deep cultural history” for more than a dozen Native American tribes. Here, the land is “scattered with ancient pottery, shells and other artifacts and features.” For over 8,000 years, people have lived near or traveled to the springs, and prehistoric and historic tribes used the area as a trade route.

The area was a flashpoint during wall construction, with several Tohono O'odham women arrested last year while protesting construction near the springs.

Much of the wall in Arizona was built on federally protected land that wildlife advocates argued should be protected and preserved for future generations. Environmental groups have long raised concerns that the wall would cause ecological damage to wildlife and plant species. They also objected to the Department of Homeland Security waiving laws meant to protect the environment and historical preservation.

ANIMAL MIGRATION ROUTES AFFECTED

On his first day in office, Biden ordered a halt to border wall construction, as he had pledged to do as a candidate. Earlier this month, he formally rescinded the emergency declaration Trump had used to fund much of the wall construction.

Biden did not address whether he planned to remove sections of wall, although he has called the wall a “waste of money.”

Customs and Border Protection officials said they suspended wall construction, aside from safety-related activities, during Biden's 60-day assessment period. They did not address specific questions from the Arizona Daily Star about the coalition's proposal to take down sections of wall.

Last October, Border Patrol officials told the Star the wall will slow down people trying to cross the border illegally, which gives agents more time to respond to remote areas.

The wall also will make it easier for agents to keep track of illicit activity at the border line and free up more time for them to patrol larger areas, Border Patrol officials said.

But wildlife advocates worry the wall is making matters worse for threatened and endangered species in Southern Arizona. In January, a rare jaguar and ocelot were spotted in the borderlands. Due to their habitats extending to both sides of the border, the 30-foot-tall bollards could completely cut off migration routes for the big cats, along with other endangered species like the Sonoran pronghorn and peninsular bighorn sheep, advocates said.

Some sections of the border wall in Arizona “create a significant environmental impact” by interfering with wildlife migration and disturbing crucial bodies of water and wetlands, according to Myles Traphagen, borderlands program coordinator for Wildlands Network.

Animals like jaguars “depend on roaming freely through the landscape for their very survival,” Jordahl said. “In many of these locations, if the wall doesn’t come down, that will be pushing these species closer and closer to extinction.”

The Arizona borderlands serve as a pathway between north and south, a “mixing pot” of tropical ecosystems of Central America with North America’s temperate environment, according to Emily Burns, program director at Sky Island Alliance.

She worries that road construction and lighting infrastructure in the wall projects will disrupt wildlife habitats and migratory patterns.

ADVOCATES CALL FOR SWIFT ACTION

Burns hopes lawmakers and administration officials “can fall in love with these amazing places on the border as we have. Then they’ll be eager and interested to invest in restoration that will benefit our communities, that will benefit our natural and cultural resources,” she said.

Rather than a “desert wasteland” as some may picture it, the region is one of the most biodiverse in North America, said Traphagen.

The report justifies wall removal priorities by describing the “vibrant” and “beautiful” landscapes and communities along Arizona’s border, as well as sections in California, New Mexico and Texas.



The Sonoran desert landscape consists of volcanic rock and fine sand at points along El Camino del Diablo on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge southwest of Ajo, Ariz., in 2016.

Mike Christy / Arizona Daily Star

Two priority areas cover about 11 miles of border on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge in Yuma County. They include Las Playas, one of the few remaining natural water sources in the region, and Pinta Sands, part of El Gran Desierto de Altar, the largest active dune system on the continent, according to the report.

“In the middle of the hot, dry desert lies Las Playas, a group of dry lake beds with no drainage outlets,” advocates wrote in the report. “When the rare rain falls in the central part of Cabeza Prieta, it flows into the ephemeral lakes, located next to the international boundary. When the playas are wet, the flora and fauna come to life and the playas become islands of emerald green.”

The report requests stopping construction on a 4.5-mile segment near the Arizona-New Mexico border, where the Peloncillo Mountains “create a biological bridge” between the Sierra Madres and Rocky Mountains.

The coalition is seeking immediate action to restore ecologically fragile areas that have been affected. They plan to release a follow-up report in the coming weeks to assess the most severely damaged areas for restabilization, erosion control and restoration, Traphagen said.

“With the monsoon season only four or five months away, swift action is needed to stabilize these sites in order to prevent catastrophic flood damage when strong summer storms arrive,” he said.

Coalition asks Biden to remove wall sections

A coalition of nearly 70 environmental groups, human-rights organizations and tribal groups has asked President Biden to remove specific sections of the border wall in Arizona. They say the 30-foot-tall wall disturbs unique and endangered wildlife, or serve as wildlife migration corridors. In all, the coalition asks for the removal of 59 miles of wall, out of more than 220 miles of wall built in Arizona since 2019. The coalition also asks for the removal of the wall by the wall.

Affected wildlife:

- ❶ **Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge:** Sonoran pronghorn
- ❷ **Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument:** Sonoran pronghorn, Sonoyta mud turtle
- ❸ **Baboquivari Mountains:** Jaguar
- ❹ **Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge:** Jaguar
- ❺ **Coronado National Forest:** Jaguar, ocelot, Chiricahua leopard Frog
- ❻ **Coronado National Memorial:** Chiricahua leopard Frog
- ❼ **San Pedro River:** Jaguar, ocelot
- ❽ **Peloncillo Mountains:** Jaguar, Chiricahua leopard Frog, black bear



