

# Work on half-finished sections of Trump's Mexico wall is futile and in some places has made border security worse, campaigners say

<https://www.businessinsider.com/last-stages-trumps-border-wall-help-people-sneak-into-us-2021-1>



Guadalupe Canyon, Arizona, facing east, with switchback roads in the distance. Since this photo was taken, a 100-foot canyon has been blasted here.

- **The rush to complete President Donald Trump's border wall with Mexico is in some places worse than pointless, campaigners told Insider.**
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- **In order to reach the border, contractors have blasted roads into terrain that was once rugged and impassable.**
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- **Some areas still have no barrier, with work likely to stop when Trump leaves office. But the roads will remain.**
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- **Customs and Border Protection officials defended their approach. But it's hard not to conclude that these parts of the US-Mexico border are easier to penetrate now than in 2016.**

Efforts to rush parts of President Donald Trump's border wall in his final days in office are doomed and in some places have actually harmed border security, according to campaigners.

Witnesses to the work in Arizona told Insider that mountainous parts of the border were easier to reach now than when Trump took power four years ago, as the process involved building new roads over rough terrain.

This is a small portion of the whole border, hundreds of miles of which have been fortified.

But sources told Insider that they'd seen a resulting increase in crossings in these weak spots, which were previously too inhospitable to be much of a security concern.

The campaigners Insider spoke to have opposed the wall from the start. But they said they could not help but notice the irony in the project harming its own aims.

## The end of the wall

Trump is due to leave office on January 20, and his successor, Joe Biden, has pledged to halt construction of the wall.

Biden suggested in December that related Trump-era asylum policies could be reversed at a slower pace, but the incoming administration made no further comment about the wall itself, [according to The Washington Post](#).

Canceling wall construction would leave behind infrastructure like roads and staging areas, created to give contractors access to difficult terrain in remote, mountainous border regions. In many of those areas, it now looks unlikely that any wall will be completed.

Sources told Insider that parts of this landscape would be more passable than they were in 2016.

None of these sources has worked in border security. But Myles Traphagen, a biologist for the Wildlands Network based in Tucson, Arizona, said that the remote areas being built on now were places that conservationists had spent decades watching closely and understanding intimately, often alongside border officials.

Officials with Customs and Border Protection told Insider that the construction would make their job easier and defended the necessity of the work still being done.

In September 2019, Trump promised that 450 miles of new wall would be done by the end of 2020. Government contractors such as Southwest Valley Constructors and [Fisher Sand & Gravel](#) have been rushing to meet this deadline.

Neither company responded to requests for comment.

According to CBP, as of December 31, 398 more miles of the border were walled off than when Trump took office. Along 54 miles, the agency said, a second barrier was added to the first.

CBP presented this combined figure of 452 miles of new wall as a triumphant fulfillment of Trump's promise of 450 miles. The US-Mexico border is 1,954 miles.

Trump is planning a celebratory visit to Alamo, Texas, on Tuesday to tout the achievements with the wall, despite the problems the project may leave.

## Roads in the wilderness

The bulk of what contractors have already built is on the flattest areas where construction is easy.

But as companies hurried to meet Trump's deadline, they moved on to mountainous areas, in some cases blasting away at places where there isn't time to actually put up a wall, [Insider previously reported](#).

Laiken Jordahl, a borderlands campaigner with the Center for Biological Diversity, told Insider in a statement that "Trump and CBP are so blindly obsessed by their shiny steel wall that they've entirely failed to consider how blasting roads into wilderness areas gives smugglers new avenues to cross the border."

A CBP spokesman, John Mennell, pushed back, saying the work was necessary and did not harm border security.

Maj. Grace Geiger of the Army Corps of Engineers, which awarded the border-wall contracts, declined to answer specific questions on the construction and referred Insider to CBP.

Access roads running parallel to the wall — allowing CBP a speedy route to intercept people who cross illegally — have long been part of the design for many sections of Trump's wall.

But in mountainous regions of Arizona, other types of route have been created purely to enable construction. These rough-hewn switchback roads are blasted into steep hillsides to allow heavy machinery to reach the construction sites.

"We're talking about a massive, monumental scale of new roads being bulldozed through pristine wilderness land," Jordahl told Insider.

Here is one in Guadalupe Canyon, part of the borderlands where Arizona meets New Mexico:



A switchback road creeping up a mountain in Coronado National Forest, Arizona. Mexico is on the right. John Darwin Kurc

The zigzag paths allows trucks, loaded with dynamite, to overcome gradients of up to 90%.

Both Traphagen and Jordahl agreed that this basic infrastructure makes access easier in an area that is otherwise inaccessible.

John Mennell, the CBP spokesperson, disagreed, telling Insider that in "many areas" of southern Arizona, the landscape alone does not prevent people from entering on foot.

"The terrain also provides opportunity for the cover and concealment of illicit cross-border activity."

He argued that any increased access from these roads cuts both ways, as law enforcement can also use them to respond more quickly to illegal crossings.

"The impedance provided by the barriers, along with the increased access and mobility gained through new and improved roads, can increase the likelihood of positive law resolutions to illegal entries," he told Insider.

He said also said that access roads that aren't converted to patrol roads can be "returned to their previous state."

When asked by Insider he did not provide any examples of this having actually taken place.

John Darwin Kurc, a photographer and campaigner who has been documenting the construction process for more than a year, told Insider he had not seen evidence of this.

"We've never seen them put an ounce of energy into restoring or revegetating the wilderness land they've destroyed," Jordahl told Insider.

As part of CBP's argument, Mennell said that any access created by these roads will be blocked by the wall itself, but did not address how this would work in areas which do not — and may never — have any wall built.

## Ravines blasted into mountains

Kurc, the photographer, has watched dramatic changes across Arizona's mountain landscape. Here, where the border passes through inhospitable areas like Guadalupe Canyon, deep ravines have been blasted through the mountains to make way for the wall.

At 30 feet high, the planned wall will be far shorter than the rock face on either side, Kurc told Insider.

"That goes through every single mountain range on the Arizona-Mexico border," he said. He told Insider about returning to Arizona earlier in the winter of 2020, after eight months photographing elsewhere. He said he was "absolutely shocked" at the change.

"It's the most ludicrous thing I've ever I've ever seen," he said. "I look at these every day and I'm like, this is insane."

The majority of these ravines have no wall built into them. And with Joe Biden taking office on January 20, they likely never will.

This is easing access in these areas, and it is now possible to walk into the ravine and back out the other side, Kurc said.

CBP has declined to discuss how it would handle an end to construction under Biden, simply repeating that companies are expected to fulfill their contracts until they are formally canceled.

## Once so rugged that "nobody crossed"

Jordahl, the borderlands campaigner, told Insider: "These are areas that never were a priority for border security. They are so remote, they saw almost no traffic."

"The pure idiocy of this administration will likely end up facilitating new cross-border smuggling routes in places that were once so rugged nobody crossed."

Conservation nonprofits have long argued that these were not hotspots. "There's not any kind of security issues in these areas," Louise Misztal, conservation director of the Sky Island Alliance, [told the High Country News](#) in October.

Kurc, the photographer, told Insider that from his observations, people usually cross much closer to towns.

However, he said that people have started to use the new paths "because we've created an infrastructure where I normally never saw a border patrol for weeks at a time."

"I personally I've sat many, many, many hours in this area, and never saw border patrol," he said. "And now you see them all the time down at the Guadalupe Canyon ranch, because they have to be there."

He described a border patrol officer telling him some weeks ago that there had been 50 incursions in a single week — in an area that previously had no more than a dozen a year.

Myles Traphagen, of the Wildlands Network, agreed with the overall assessment.

He is not romantic about border security, acknowledging the tensions and drug traffic that border zones can attract.

But, he said, other methods such as electronic surveillance are far more effective.

"If I step outside of my role as a conservationist, and if I put a border patrol hat on, I would say that everything that they're doing is tactically wrong," he told Insider.

Insider approached the Arizona local CBP Union for interview, but did not receive a response.

## 'Busywork'



The campaigners Insider spoke to are more strongly concerned with the potential for ecological and humanitarian disaster. Some of the areas being blasted, such as Monument Hill inside the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument— are [sacred tribal lands](#).

Others formerly were pristine nature reserves with high levels of environmental protection.



Guadalupe Canyon. John Darwin Kurc

The scale of the destruction has been astounding. Blast reports seen by Insider showed workers getting through more than 2 tons of explosive in one part of the Peloncillo Mountains in a single day. Insider understands that those kind of quantities are expended most days.

Sources believe this is highly convenient for construction companies who are making money from the work, whether it ends up being useful or not.

"It's busywork," said Kurc