

President Biden Halts Border Wall, But Environmentalists Want Sections Gone

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Within hours of being sworn in, President Joe Biden ordered all construction to stop on the U.S.-Mexico border wall that started going up under former President Donald Trump.

Biden's edict went out Wednesday evening. It declared an end to the so-called national emergency Trump had just extended for another year days before he left office. But it didn't stop construction altogether.

Melissa Owen is a landowner in Sasabe, Arizona, a tiny outpost on the Mexican border. She has argued the construction depleted her wells and had assumed the project would end with Biden's order so she called the wall contractor's Arizona office to check.

"And I said that's curious, it was my understanding there was an executive order yesterday to stop construction. And he said, no we will continue to pump water as needed," she said the morning after Biden was inaugurated.

Fisher Industries landed at least \$2 billion in construction contracts for segments of the border wall. That includes the stretch between Sasabe and Nogales, a swath that had an 18-foot-high border wall erected in 2008 that was torn out last summer to make room for the 30-foot-high wall Trump vowed to build.

The new wall isn't just taller, it's longer and, up until last week, it was ranging into the hard scramble mountain ranges of western Santa Cruz County. Construction crews were dynamiting the rocky terrain of the Tumacacori Highlands right up until hours after the executive order went out.

"I've always believed that most of the people in the USA did not understand the scope of the destruction that this border wall project was causing," Owen said.

She signed on to a lawsuit to stop using military money to build the wall and has resisted it since the start.

Biden mandated all work to pause within a week. A spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers said all contractors building the wall under the military spending plan paused construction. And that other than safely preparing sites for the halt, work has stopped. Cranes that were working on the top of the border wall days before Biden took office were gone. Trailers for hauling large equipment were sitting on dirt roads near the border. Like the wells sucking up Owens' water in Sasabe, work hasn't totally stopped. Activists and local journalists stressed that construction was still continuing along with road grading adjacent to Arizona's border days after the new order to pause.

But there's still more than \$4 billion worth of contracts already signed for wall work.

And the future of the border wall is up in the air not only for what may still go in but what some want to see torn out.

Laiken Jordahl is a borderlands campaigner with the Center for Biological Diversity based in Tucson.

He's among those calling on the new president to permanently stop construction. What'd he really like to see: "Trump built these walls with no Congressional approval and with no judicial review. So the right thing to do would be to tear them all down." But that's unlikely to happen.

"Of course we have to be realistic with our demands. We certainly want to focus our energy on removing sections of barriers in wildlife corridors, in sacred areas to indigenous nations. In waterways where they're stopping the flow of water. And we'd certainly will be advocating to tear down walls in all of those locations," he said.

So the wall project is just paused for now, its future uncertain. There's the billions of dollars in contracts that remain and then the legal battles for the wall. A clash over military spending once defended by Trump is still on the Supreme Court's calendar for next month.