

Biden Suspends Border Wall Construction For Two Months

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LULU GARCIA-NAVARRO, HOST:

As promised, President Biden has stopped construction of the massive wall between the U.S. and Mexico, Donald Trump's signature project. The new administration has called for a two-month suspension while border security officials sort out what to do next. Down in the borderlands, opponents of the wall are celebrating and say the fight may not be over. NPR's John Burnett reports.

JOHN BURNETT, BYLINE: The bulldozers and excavators, the concrete trucks and water haulers are now parked. The construction crews are gone. And hundreds of 30-foot-tall steel panels are stacked up and down the borderline.

LAIKEN JORDAHL: You know, we're cautiously optimistic. And we're definitely celebrating. We all raised a glass of Mezcal the night that the order was issued.

BURNETT: That's Laiken Jordahl with the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson.

JORDAHL: We've been fighting this project for years. And this is the first time we've been able to just take a step back and have a deep sigh of relief.

BURNETT: Contractors were able to put up 453 miles of wall over the past four years. They fenced off more than half of Arizona's border with Mexico in the environmentally sensitive Sonoran Desert. Working 24/7, racing the clock until inauguration day, crews were dynamiting mountainsides to make way for sections of wall that would likely never get built.

Gary Nabhan is a longtime ecologist and writer in southern Arizona. He says in just one protected wilderness, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, the wall blocked 52 wildlife corridors. For activists like Nabhan, their energies now turn to restoration.

GARY NABHAN: Take down the wall in the critical corridors for wildlife that are usually watered places, rivers and oases. It's going to take a Herculean effort to undo the damage.

BURNETT: The Biden administration has not revealed the fate of the border wall, one of the biggest federal construction projects in history. During the 60-day pause, officials plan to study how to, quote, "redirect funding and repurpose contracts." Nearly 300 more miles of wall have been contracted but remain unfinished. The government could reportedly save \$2.5 billion if construction does not resume. But terminating contracts early also means paying tens of millions in cancellation fees. Most landowners on the Rio Grande never wanted a giant security fence to begin with.

Beto Cardenas is a lawyer for Sacred Heart Children's Home, an orphanage in Laredo whose property was in the path of a barrier.

BETO CARDENAS: Obviously, given the fact that there has been a pause, we would hope that the Biden administration would see that there isn't a need for a physical barrier.

BURNETT: Cardenas, who's worked on Capitol Hill as an immigration expert, says unspent funds may be redirected to a different kind of border security, such as high-tech autonomous surveillance towers.

CARDENAS: I would expect that there would be an investment in all sorts of other personnel, infrastructure and technology, measures necessary to protect the Southwestern border.

BURNETT: Property owners opposed to the wall have long maintained that Customs and Border Protection could substitute technology for steel and concrete. But even that would run into opposition from activists like Tricia Cortez with the No Border Wall Coalition in Laredo.

TRICIA CORTEZ: We don't want the direction to move from a physical wall to a virtual wall and continue down this path of militarizing the border.

BURNETT: Biden's Homeland Security Department is ready to mothball the wall and explore other security measures, according to Representative Henry Cuellar, a Laredo Democrat. He has nearly 200 border miles in his district. He says he was in touch with an executive at DHS last week.

HENRY CUELLAR: You know, I don't like the wall. But we got to use other things - cameras, technology, drones and all that. And I understand some people don't want anything. They don't want cameras. They don't want lights. They don't want underground sensors. And I'm sorry, but we have a responsibility to secure the border.

BURNETT: DHS confirms every wall construction project has been suspended. When asked what comes next, the White House isn't saying yet.

John Burnett, NPR News.

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