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Government Report Says Cost Of Border Fence Escalating

by LADB Staff

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The barrier that the US has erected along the border with Mexico has cost more than anticipated, has not been as effective as had been intended, and will require another large allocation of funds to continue operations. The information, in a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in early September, was released at the same time as a survey from the Pew Hispanic Center, which contained information about past and possible future immigration patterns. The report noted that illegal immigration from Mexico declined by more than 73% between 2006 and early 2009. At the same time, one in three respondents to the survey, conducted in Mexico, said they would emigrate to the US, legally or illegally, because of deteriorating economic and social conditions at home.

Billions of dollars needed for maintenance in next 20 years

The GAO report received strong reactions in the US, with many criticisms of the project centering on the cost to taxpayers. Since 2005, the government has spent about US\$2.4 billion to expand the wall by several hundred miles. This includes preliminary work begun before the US Senate fully approved the project in 2006 (SourceMex, October 11, 2006). As of May of this year, about 670 miles (1,078 km) of the barrier had been completed or were under construction before President Barack Obama took the symbolic step of eliminating funding for further expansion of the barrier in the 2010 budget (SourceMex, May 13, 2009).

Obama's action notwithstanding, the GAO report projected that another US\$6.5 billion would be needed simply for maintenance of the wall during the next 20 years. The barrier has been breached more than 3,300 times since 2005, with the average repair estimated at US\$1,300. Immigrant-rights organizations, environmental advocates, and a coalition of business leaders and public officials from US communities along the border had voiced objections to the wall through the years (SourceMex, July 11, 2007, October 10, 2007, and April 23, 2008). But the GAO's 47-page document, detailing the cost of the project, attracted further criticism. "When our nation is in the midst of an economic crisis, we wonder how many teacher salaries, police officers, miles of road, or school books could be financed instead of throwing large amounts of money for bricks to fix a problem that requires serious, long-term solutions," said Angelica Salas of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.

The wall's environmental damage remains a concern for many environmental groups and US legislators who represent the US-Mexico border area. In late September, Rep. Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX), introduced legislation requiring the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to identify and address the ecological impacts of the barrier. "Our borderlands are rich in natural and cultural resources, but they also can be places for illegal activity," said Rodriguez. "This bill is the next logical step in protecting the ecological integrity of our borders while also pursuing the measures necessary to secure our borders and defend our communities." The number of breaches has led some experts to cast doubt on the wall's effectiveness. "The existing border fortifications do not keep

undocumented migrants out of the US," said Wayne Cornelius, director emeritus of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). "Not even half are being apprehended on any given trip to the border, and, of those who are apprehended, the success rate on the second or third try is upwards of 95%."

Some agencies that work along the border defend the barrier without directly criticizing the GAO report. "While they [the GAO findings] have highlighted some risks and their factual statements are correct, we are not as pessimistic as they are," Mark Borkowski, executive director of the Secure Border Initiative (SBI), part of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), said in an interview with The Christian Science Monitor.

The US Border Patrol (USBP) also agrees with the report's conclusions but notes that many cannot be verified because there is no precedent for the border wall. Furthermore, the agency argues that, despite the breaches, the wall has reduced the number of illegal crossings. Along with the wall's expansion, the CBP has added more than 11,000 agents to the US-Mexico border area in the last three years. With a lot of emphasis on patrolling remote areas, many would-be migrants find ways to breach the wall. Still others attempt to cross into the US at the border stations.

Migrants seeking alternate routes into US

There is some evidence that the wall and other measures to shore up security along the border, including technology and stepped-up patrols, have deterred crossings in remote areas. Because of this, many immigrant smugglers have returned to a traditional method of entry trying to sneak migrants in under the nose of inspectors. A survey that Cornelius conducted among new Mexican immigrants in early 2009 showed that 28% of respondents entered through a border station. Of the total, 52% snuck in by hiding inside a vehicle and another 39% used fraudulent documents. "This is now a well-established mode of illegal entry," Cornelius told The New York Times. He noted that a growing number of women and children are now opting to avoid dangerous areas and attempting to cross illegally at border stations.

The tight security has also prompted smugglers to attempt to bring in undocumented immigrants via the California coast. In many cases, the immigrants are dropped off at remote sites, along with shipments of marijuana. US Coast Guard (USCG) officials said interdictions of human cargo along the Southern California coast have doubled to 400 since 2008. In many cases, the migrants are brought into the country in small fishing boats known as pangas. "We've seen a huge spike in smuggling by water," said Lauren Mack, a spokeswoman for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office in San Diego. "It's become very, very risky and difficult to cross by land. Smugglers try to jump where they think we're not looking." This method of smuggling at times can be dangerous because the vessels, which are 19 ft to 28 ft in length, are often overloaded. "We've seen them pretty packed," Mack said. "They cram them in there just like they cram them in the vans." But smuggling migrants appears to be a secondary activity to moving marijuana into the US.

USCG Capt. Thomas Farris, the top-ranking Coast Guard official at the Port of San Diego, said authorities have confiscated 60,000 pounds of marijuana so far this year. "Drug interdictions are six times above what they were last year," said Farris. US economic slowdown deters illegal

immigration Illegal immigration has fallen sharply in recent years, in part because of increased security measures. But most analysts agree that a bigger deterrent has been the major economic slowdown in the US, which has reduced the number of jobs available in sectors that traditionally employ immigrants, such as construction and the hospitality and restaurant industries (SourceMex, January 21, 2009 and June 03, 2009).

Some reports indicate that the number of would-be immigrants had already begun to fall in 2006. A report by the Pew Hispanic Center in late September showed that illegal immigration declined by more than 73% between 2006 and March of 2009. The findings were part of a larger survey by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project. The Washington-based organization conducted face-to-face interviews with 1,000 adults in Mexico between May 26 and June 2, 2009.

The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points. But the slowdown in the influx of undocumented immigrants might be temporary, especially if the Mexican economy remains in the doldrums and if drug-related violence continues to escalate. One of every three respondents to the Pew Survey said he or she would emigrate to the US legally or illegally if given the opportunity, and many would do it by illegal means. A majority of respondents, about 57%, believe that people enjoy a better standard of living in the US than in Mexico. This compares with 51% who gave that answer in a Pew survey in 2007. "People see the US as a land of opportunity and at the same time see many problems in Mexico. They are worried about crime, the economy, drugs, and corruption," said researcher Richard Wike, who helped conduct the survey. Still, the lack of jobs in the US remains a major deterrent, and many Mexicans recognize the situation.

About two-thirds of respondents said they would not risk emigrating to the US at this time. More significantly, the poll showed that four of every ten respondents said they know someone who returned from the US after failing to obtain a job. Another 47% reported knowing someone who came back to their community because they were stopped by the US Border Patrol. Many respondents were greatly concerned about violent crime, much of which is linked to the drug trade. This was reflected in the enormous support for President Felipe Calderon's anti-drug efforts. More than eight in 10 respondents said they support the use of the Army in government efforts to fight major drug-trafficking organizations.

The survey uncovered a paradox in attitudes toward government. About 94% of respondents said they had very little confidence in Mexican elected officials, whom they consider corrupt. An even more telling number was the high level of respondents, 68%, who consider Mexican political leaders a great obstacle for Mexico's development and economic recovery. Yet, despite the lack of confidence in politicians, the current administration received high marks. About 68% of respondents said they have a favorable view of President Calderon and his governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "A majority of Mexicans gives high marks to President Calderon," said the survey, which noted that a majority of Mexicans believe the president, the national government, and the military are having a positive impact on the war against drug traffickers.

The numbers were not as favorable for leaders of the two other major parties. Only 47% held a favorable view of Beatriz Paredes Rangel, president of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Jesus Ortega, president of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), fared even worse. He

received a 37% favorable rating. The Pew data was collected before the July 6 election, which gave totally different results. In the election, the PRI won by a landslide, in what many believe was at least a partial repudiation of Calderon's efforts to control drug-related violence and his management of the economy (SourceMex, July 08, 2009).

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