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## Concerns Grow about Impact of Border Wall on Local Communities, Environment

by Carlos Navarro

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Environmental groups and current and former public officials are speaking out about the potentially negative environmental impact of the huge barrier proposed by US President Donald Trump on the millions of people who live along the US-Mexico border ([SourceMex, Jan. 18, 2017](#)). According to the Wilson Center's State of the Border Report, about 15 million people lived in the border area as of 2010. That number is expected to double by 2040 if growth rates remain at current levels, according to the same report.

One major concern is the impact on the supply and quality of water in the border region and the potential for flooding. The existing wall, which was reinforced and expanded as part of the Secure Fence Act of 2006 ([SourceMex, Oct. 11, 2006](#), and [Oct. 10, 2007](#)) is already causing some problems, even though it covers only about one-third of the roughly 3,200-km (2,000-mile) border.

"A lack of drainage near Nogales, Sonora, caused a section of the wall to collapse in 2011," Juan Pablo Mayorga, a journalist with expertise on environmental matters, wrote in a guest column for the business publication *Expansión*.

According to Mayorga, the huge barrier proposed by President Trump could modify water flows near the border, altering the depth of the area's aquifers and threatening the supply of drinking water.

Other researchers came to the same conclusion. "The wall is going to affect the flow and the trajectory of waterways, which will have a negative impact on the region's environment, including the quality and quantity of water, the quality of the air, the fertilization of soils," said Gerardo Ceballos, a researcher at the Instituto de Ecología (Ecology Institute) at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

The Border Action Network (BAN), an Arizona-based organization that advocates for the health and well-being of communities along the border, has warned that the wall could cause flooding and build up debris on both sides of the border.

Ana Córdova and Carlos de la Parra, researchers at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in Tijuana, pointed out that water plays a very important role in the dispersion of seed and vegetable spores. "The strategy and actions of the US to increase security abandons the principle of collaboration and the good neighbor policy that has been cultivated for decades," Córdova and de la Parra said in a book entitled "Una barrera a nuestro ambiente compartido: El muro fronterizo entre México y Estados Unidos" (A Barrier to Our Shared Environment: The Wall Between Mexico and the US).

Córdova and de la Parra put the book together with input from the nongovernmental Consorcio de Investigación y Política Ambiental del Suroeste (Consortium for Research and Environmental Politics in the Southwest), and two federal environmental agencies, the Secretaría de Medio

Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Department of the Environment and Natural Resources, SEMARNAT) and its affiliate, the Instituto Nacional de Ecología (National Institute for Ecology, INE).

According to the book, the removal of vegetation to construct the wall would have other negative effects on the region, such as an increase in soil temperatures and evaporation and reduced water absorption. "This generates alterations in the microclimate," the authors said.

## *A barrier to wildlife*

Beyond the impact on humans, scientists and environmental advocates warn about potential problems for wildlife in the area, including the creation of new obstacles for animal migration.

A study by UNAM's ecology institute is examining the potential impact of the wall on 800 species of animals and plants along the border, including black bears, bison, wild sheep, jaguars, prairie dogs, and wolves.

In many places, the current barrier has created an inconvenience for some species, but not a full deterrent. One of those species is the bison, which migrates from New Mexico and Arizona to Chihuahua and Sonora every October to find better foraging conditions and water. An account in the daily newspaper *ElDiario de Coahuila* describes the migratory pattern of one group of animals that would be affected by the construction of a huge wall.

"A herd of 15 bison in New Mexico is walking south. In the distance, a barbed wire fence blocks their way into Mexico. The wire is not sufficient to deter an animal that weighs half a ton and is 2 meters high. They break the wire and the border demarcation. They have arrived in Mexico," the newspaper explained. "In the same manner as the bison, another 800 species of flora and fauna along the border will suffer alterations to their ecosystem if a solid wall is constructed."

The existing wall, which was expanded in 2007, has already caused some difficulties for animals to find food, water, and mates. Many of these animals, such as jaguars, ocelots, and gray wolves, are already on the list of endangered species.

"If you just go and you cut movements off, you can potentially destabilize these entire networks of population," Aaron Flesch, a biologist at the University of Arizona, said in an interview with the online news site *TheTexas Tribune*.

The federal government took some steps to help wildlife just after the first expansion of the wall, including rerouting some sections of the fence, particularly in areas near nature preserves. One segment, near Brownsville, Texas, contains small openings at the base of the fence every 500 feet to allow small wild cats like the ocelot to get through to the other side.

Environmental advocates wonder whether these actions, while well intentioned, are effective. Sonia Najera, grasslands program manager for the Nature Conservancy, said she has not heard of situations where the ocelots have found the so-called "cat holes."

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission (TPW) came out against the expansion of the wall in Texas in 2007 because of the damage the barrier would cause to wildlife, especially along the protected areas that had been created along the border. The commission has expressed even more vigorous opposition to the Trump plan, which would create barriers that would make it almost

impossible for the thousands of species in the area to migrate across the border. “You’ve spent money to build this environmental corridor, and now you’re going to go right through the middle of it and put up a wall,” said Ygnacio Garza, a former Brownsville mayor who chairs the TPW.

There are similar concerns in Arizona, where advocates have also publicly opposed the Trump project. “When you have such beautiful wilderness areas as we have here in Arizona, the idea of putting this large wall that prevents the migration of animals, that scars the earth itself, and especially knowing how ineffectual it is, is something that is just sad,” Juanita Molina, BAN’s executive director, said in an interview with National Public Radio.

### *No word from NAFTA environmental agencies*

In addition to Trump’s proposed border wall, the president’s push to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and his proposed cutbacks to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have raised concerns about the future of the environment in the border region. And they have raised questions about the viability of the environmental agencies that were created as part of NAFTA ([SourceMex, April 6, 1994](#)).

A NAFTA environmental side agreement created the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) to address environmental matters germane to the three member countries—Mexico, Canada, and the US. Among other things, the CEC has discretion to develop recommendations related to endangered species and other environmental issues in the region.

The CEC has weighed in on some important issues in recent years, including the Mexican government’s failure to deal with an abandoned plant that was causing lead poisoning among residents of an impoverished neighborhood in Tijuana ([SourceMex, May 24, 2000](#)).

In 1997, the commission issued a report warning about the increase in air pollution in the three NAFTA member countries ([SourceMex, Sept. 24, 1997](#)). In 2004, the CEC took the bold step of recommending that Mexico suspend imports of genetically modified corn ([SourceMex, Sept. 22, 2004](#)).

While the CEC has oversight of the broader environmental issues, the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) was created under NAFTA to address issues specific to the border. In 1996, BECC expressed its opposition to a US government plan to store nuclear waste near Sierra Blanca, Texas, and Carlsbad, New Mexico, which it said could endanger the lives of residents on both sides of the border ([SourceMex, July 24, 1996](#)).

BECC, however, does not weigh in on issues very frequently. The commission instead works primarily to promote water conservation, development of infrastructure projects, pollution reduction, and management of water and solid waste. The infrastructure projects are financed in conjunction with a sister agency, the North American Development Bank (NADB), which was created specifically to finance infrastructure projects in the US-Mexico border area.

According to BECC, its mission is “to preserve, protect, and enhance human health and the environment of the US-Mexico border region by strengthening cooperation among interested parties and supporting sustainable projects through a transparent binational process in close coordination with NADB, federal, state, and local agencies, the private sector, and the general public.”

CEC and BECC have thus far remained generally silent on Trump's wall proposal. The two organizations depend on funding from the US government and are likely taking a cautious approach, even though they have spoken out on other environmental controversies in the past.

A major concern is the possibility that financing for infrastructure projects could be reduced during the Trump administration, especially if the US withdraws from NAFTA or greatly reduces its participation in the agreement. Even with this threat, the NADB is moving forward with requests for hundreds of millions of dollars in new loan capital to expand the its lending capacity in new types of projects.

US Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, has introduced a bill in the US Congress to maintain the flow of funding for the bank, which is based in San Antonio, Texas. The US Department of the Treasury and Mexico's counterpart, the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP) have oversight authority over the NADB, which will soon merge with the BECC.

Cuellar's initiative would streamline the NADB's project approval process while requiring additional reports to ensure that projects financed by the bank provide value to the border region and taxpayers.

"We are at a critical juncture. A major setback [in US-Mexico relations] is a possibility, but also possible is the start of a new era," outgoing NADB CEO Gerónimo Gutiérrez Fernández told the San Antonio Express-News. Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto nominated Gutiérrez as the next Mexican ambassador to Washington, and his successor has not been appointed.

### *Are water treaties in jeopardy?*

The proposed border barrier could also cause other problems that could affect the border states. A study by the Center for American Progress (CAP), a nonpartisan policy institute in Washington, DC, warns that western US states could be hurt if the deteriorating relations between the US and Mexico affect a landmark 2012 agreement signed in 2012 by the two countries to share and manage water supplies from the Colorado River ([SourceMex, Nov. 28, 2012](#)). The agreement was reached after years of bitter disputes over non-compliance of the 1944 Water Treaty that sets water-sharing quotas for the Rio Grande and the Colorado River ([SourceMex, July 16, 2003](#), [Sept. 1, 2004](#), [Aug. 30, 2006](#)). The agreement is due to expire this year, CAP said, and President Peña Nieto's government might not be willing to make any concessions to the US regarding water sharing.

"The Trump administration has the responsibility to address and alleviate this uncertainty by continuing the decades-long effort to improve water management in the basin through federal collaboration with western states and Mexico," said the CAP report. "However, the administration needs to clarify its stance on relations with Mexico and demonstrate its commitment to productive environmental and water security policies. Any new trade deals should not be pursued at the expense of the gains made in managing the Colorado River."

The threat of water shortages is exacerbated by an increasingly drier climate in the western states caused by climate change. "The dry nature of the West and a changing climate have created economic and ecological challenges for the communities and wildlife that depend on the river," said the CAP report. "The Colorado River Delta has lost more than 80% of its wetlands and is now a parched, dusty plain for much of the year. And the water behind the world-famous Hoover Dam has dropped perilously close to shortage levels, which would mean cuts for communities and farmers in Arizona and Nevada, and if shortages deepen, across much larger swaths of the West as well."

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