A photograph of a desert landscape featuring several tall saguaro cacti in the foreground and middle ground. A rusted metal border wall runs diagonally across the scene, separating the cacti from a more open desert area in the background. The lighting suggests late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows and warm tones.

Continental Divide

Borderlands, Wildlife, People and the WALL

In the borderlands of the United States and Mexico, a diversity of ecosystems and wildlife converge. This unique and ecologically significant area spans desert, mountain and subtropical habitats, supporting thousands of species of plants and animals, dozens of human communities and many sites of cultural and historic importance. Sadly, the combined impacts of undocumented immigration and border security activities are disrupting and degrading wildlife habitat and affecting the health of these sensitive lands.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the U.S. Border Patrol dramatically increased its enforcement efforts in urban areas. Consequently, undocumented immigration, drug trafficking and other illegal activities shifted into the remote and sensitive lands of one of the nation's most ecologically significant regions. In response, the Border Patrol began extending wall construction, road building, lighting projects, off-road vehicle and low-flying helicopter patrols to areas that had been undisturbed refuges for wildlife. Armed with a controversial legal waiver under the Real ID Act of 2005, the Department of Homeland Security can construct new walls and infrastructure in the borderlands at a breakneck pace, without the guidance of environmental laws, scientific study or public input.

From seas of saguaro cactus to pine-clad mountains and verdant river corridors, the borderlands harbor spectacular and irreplaceable natural wonders. Many wild species that live here are found nowhere else in the United States—including the imperiled jaguar, ocelot, Sonoran pronghorn, Mexican gray wolf and pygmy owl.

Sensitive lands under siege

As a result of border security activities, a pristine region—much of it on public lands set aside to protect rare and imperiled wildlife and sensitive habitat—is under siege.

Several hundred miles of border walls and roads are severing vital wildlife corridors, destroying and degrading fragile ecosystems and merely shifting illegal activities to other sensitive areas. New walls, rushed to completion without careful study or design, alter natural water flows and exacerbate flooding, causing millions of dollars in property damage on both sides of the border. New roads and disturbed areas now provide avenues for invasive species to spread. These roads also give vehicles access to previously inaccessible places, resulting in increased illegal traffic, erosion and disturbance. To the dismay of local American Indian tribes and the public at large, many historic and cultural sites are irreparably damaged.

Border walls are supposed to be a solution to the influx of undocumented immigrants and drug smuggling, but even former Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff admitted that walls do not stop the illegal traffic. People climb over, dig under, cut through or simply walk around the walls, begging the question: Is a policy that promotes an ineffective solution with damaging consequences worth the billions of dollars taxpayers are spending on it?

Opportunity for change

The Obama administration and Congress have an opportunity to take a fresh look at current border security policies and strategies and to enact legislation that will better integrate national security concerns with natural and cultural resource protection.

Most important, the Obama administration and Congress need to return the rule of law and the voice of science to the borderlands by working together to repeal the Real ID Act waiver provision. This provision grants the secretary of homeland security sole discretion, without Congressional oversight, to waive any and all laws “necessary to ensure expeditious construction of the barriers and roads...” Former Secretary Chertoff repeatedly invoked the Real ID Act, each time increasing the number of laws waived and the geographic scope of the application. Nearly three dozen environmental, cultural, public health and safety laws have been brushed aside for wall construction. This disregard of more than a century's worth of laws intended to protect Americans and the ecosystems on which we all depend is both unprecedented and environmentally unsound.

Recommendations for new borderlands policies

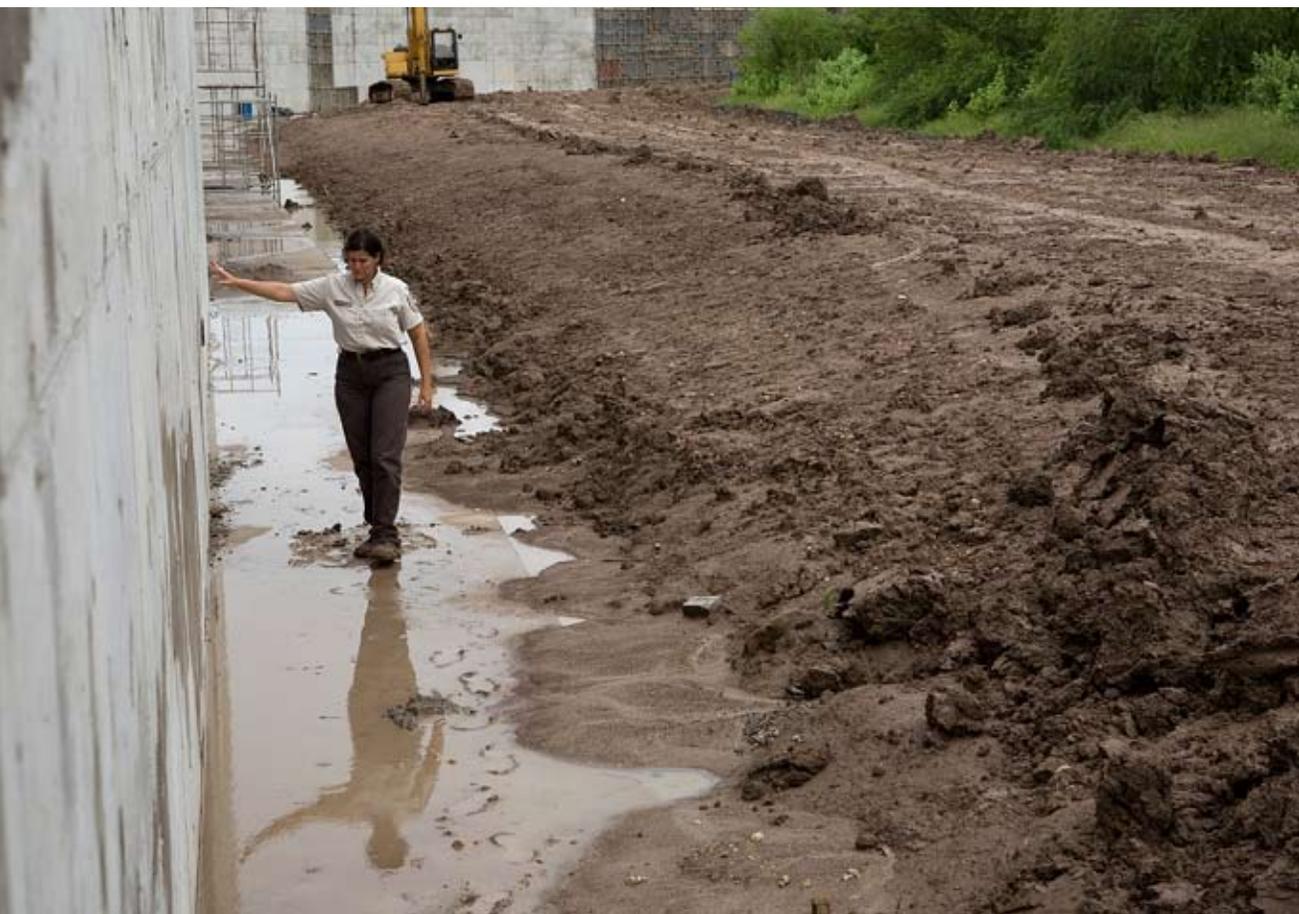
New borderlands policies are clearly needed and should include the following elements:

- Repeal of the Real ID Act waiver authority.
- Development of a borderlands monitoring and mitigation plan to address the full range of ecological and environmental impacts of border infrastructure and operations.
- Requirement for meaningful consultation with private landowners and public-land and wildlife managers prior to any future border wall construction.
- Adoption of a new national border protection strategy based on findings from a functional assessment and cost comparison of border security alternatives and an analysis of past costs to public and tribal lands along the border.
- Suspension of additional border wall construction until 90 days after the national border protection strategy is submitted to Congress.
- Coordination of natural and cultural resource protection training by relevant federal and state agencies for customs and border protection agents to minimize or avoid adverse impacts on sensitive resources.
- Amendment to the Secure Fence Act of 2006 to change the emphasis from blindly building walls to gaining operational control of our northern and southern borders with natural, technological and manpower-based security methods.

Border wall construction will bisect much of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem, home of the iconic saguaro cactus (top), and may impact the kit fox (bottom) and other grassland species in New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

©Chris Linder (cactus); ©Krista Schlyer (kit fox)

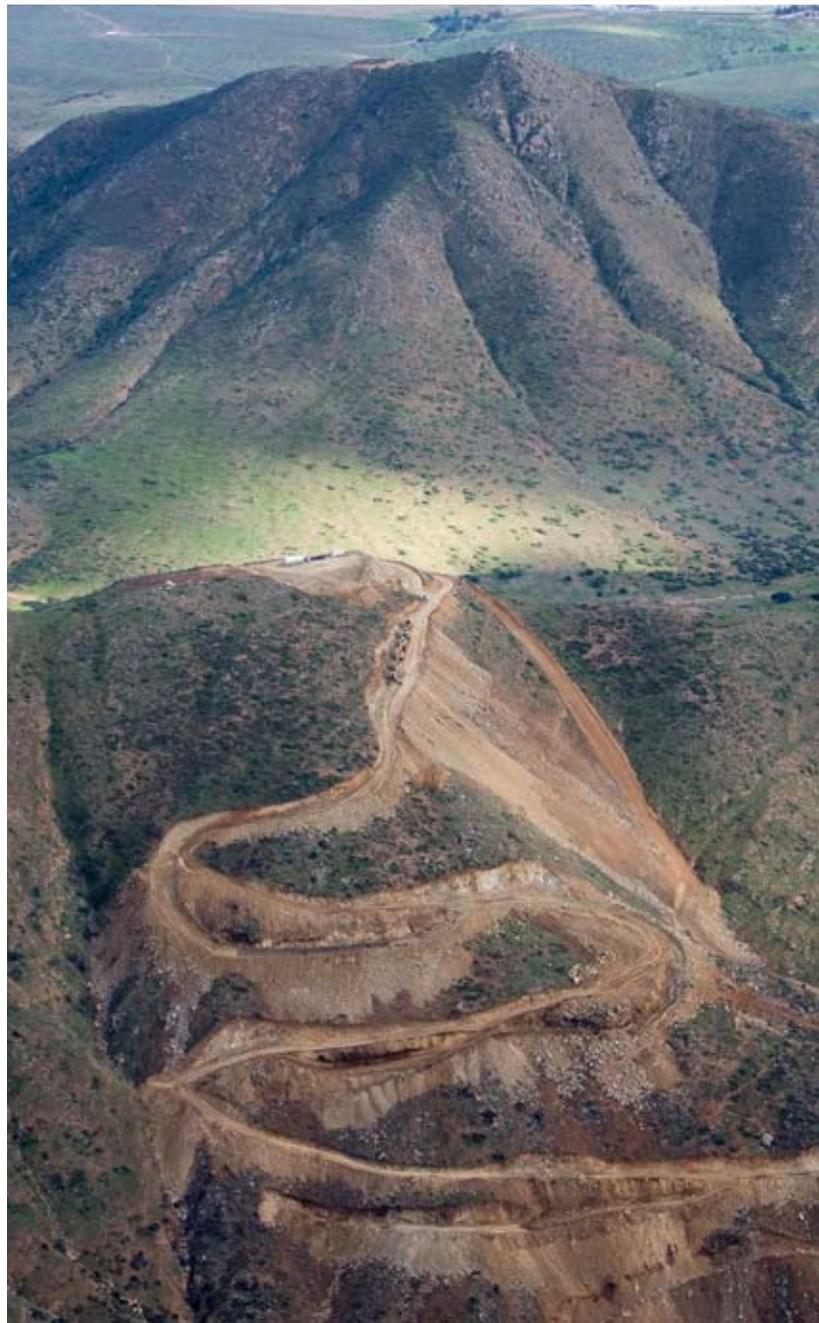






Wild animals in the borderlands, from bighorn sheep (top left) to javelina (top right), are facing habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation due to border wall construction (bottom left). Roads and construction have torn up public lands all along the border, including the Otay Mountains, a designated wilderness, (bottom right) and the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge (bottom center).

Clockwise from top left: ©Krista Schlyer, © Krista Schlyer, ©Roy Toft, ©Claudio Contreras Koob, ©Krista Schlyer





A 15-foot wall of steel in southwestern Arizona blocks passage for wildlife along dozens of miles of dry desert landscape, keeping imperiled species from reliable year-round water sources found on one side of the wall.

©Jeff Foott

For more information on this issue and to learn more about borderlands ecosystems, visit:

www.ilcp.com/borderlands

www.defenders.org/border



Cover: About 600 miles of wall has been built along the nearly 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, much of it through fragile ecosystems like the Sonoran Desert.

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