

DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE • LOS CAMINOS DEL RIO • MCALLEN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE • NATURE FESTIVALS OF AMERICA • NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION • NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY • NORTH AMERICAN BUTTERFLY ASSOCIATION • RIO GRANDE VALLEY NATIVE PLANT PROJECT • RIO GRANDE VALLEY NATURE COALITION • RIO GRANDE WILDERNESS SOCIETY • SIERRA CLUB • SOUTH TEXAS NATURE COOP • TEXAS PRODUCE ASSOCIATION • THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY • VALLEY INTERNATIONAL COLD STORAGE • VALLEY NATURE CENTER

Michael Chertoff
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20538

Dear Secretary Chertoff:

We are writing to you regarding the recently announced plans by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to construct a double layer, reinforced wall along portions of the international border in southern Texas. The unique natural resources of southern Texas are part of our national heritage and it is unnecessary to sacrifice them, or the livelihoods of thousands of Americans, to effectively secure our southern border. The proposed fence would be economically and ecologically devastating to communities that are dependent on legal trade with Mexico, millions of wildlife tourism dollars, and river-irrigated valley agriculture. We urge the DHS and CBP to reconsider the construction of a fence in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, instead employing virtual fencing or other low-impact infrastructure and technology wherever possible, and to consult with federal land managers, local communities, private landowners, and the public to craft more meaningful and effective border policies.

The construction of a fence along the last 100 miles of the Rio Grande River would effectively sacrifice decades of time, money, and manpower spent restoring the river corridor and creating a booming wildlife-dependent tourism economy. The construction of a fence in this region would not only directly impact critical wildlife habitat for many endangered species and increase soil erosion along the flood plain, but would also eliminate access for wildlife to the area's only reliable source of fresh water, the Rio Grande. Each year, nearly 200,000 tourists visit the area to view rare birds and other wildlife, and pump an estimated \$150 million into otherwise impoverished communities. Every year, tiny Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge alone draws 150,000 visitors, who spend millions of dollars in recreational expenditures. The Santa Ana Refuge, together with other well-developed tourist infrastructure and destinations, prompts significant recreational spending that sustains many thousands of local jobs. Communities such as Brownsville, Weslaco, Mission and McAllen have invested significant funds in nature centers and natural areas to capitalize on the ever-increasing interest in the natural attractions of the region. This is no longer limited to birders, with activities such as nature photography and wildlife viewing becoming increasingly popular. In a real sense, the Lower Rio Grande Valley has become an international destination for its natural resources, and a threat to these resources is a direct threat to the continued well-being of these communities.

Mr. Secretary, you have the power, authority, and obligation to avert an economic and ecological disaster in south Texas. The Department of Homeland Security should make a good-faith effort to understand and consider the needs of local communities, the applicable federal laws, the decades of land purchasing and intensive ecological restoration in the Rio Grande Valley, and the dependence of Texans on a thriving agricultural and wildlife-dependent economy. It is clear that we all have a stake in promoting sensitivity to the environment and human communities along the border. We,

therefore, respectfully request that you not exercise the waiver authority contained under the REAL-ID Act, an authority that should be used only in the most limited of circumstances, and instead formally consult with the FWS and local communities to design solutions that are specific to Texas, such as virtual fencing and other low-impact infrastructure and technology.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director
Valley Nature Center

cc: The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison
The Honorable John Cornyn
The Honorable Louie Gohmert
The Honorable Ted Poe
The Honorable Sam Johnson

The Honorable Ralph M. Hall
The Honorable Jeb Hensarling
The Honorable Joe Barton
The Honorable John A. Culberson
The Honorable Kevin Brady
The Honorable Al Green
The Honorable Michael T. McCaul
The Honorable Mike Conaway
The Honorable Kay Granger
The Honorable Mac Thornberry
The Honorable Ron Paul
The Honorable Rubén Hinojosa
The Honorable Silvestre Reyes
The Honorable Chet Edwards
The Honorable Sheila Jackson-Lee
The Honorable Randy Neugebauer
The Honorable Charles A. Gonzalez
The Honorable Lamar Smith
The Honorable Nick Lampson
The Honorable Ciro Rodriguez
The Honorable Kenny Marchant
The Honorable Lloyd Doggett
The Honorable Michael Burgess
The Honorable Solomon P. Ortiz
The Honorable Henry Cuellar
The Honorable Gene Green
The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
The Honorable John Carter
The Honorable Pete Sessions