Border Wall: A Costly, Useless, Wildlife Disaster

The U.S. southern border straddles some of the most biologically important areas in the nation. Photo U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

PRESIDENT Trump wants to extend the existing 350 miles of border wall to cover the entire 2000-mile U.S./Mexico border. The Southwest Environmental Center is ramping up our efforts to stop him. Here’s why:

Cost
Estimates range from $21.6 billion (Dept. of Homeland Security) to nearly $70 billion (Congressional Democrats), and that’s just for construction. Maintenance could cost another $150 million annually.

Not effective
The wall will slow, but not stop people from crossing. The Border Patrol has called it a "speed bump in the desert." Former Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano said, "Show me a 50-foot wall, and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder."

Not needed
Apprehensions of undocumented border crossers from Mexico were at a 50-year low even before Trump was elected. Most people in the country illegally do not cross remote sections of the border, but rather enter through ports of entry and overstay their visas.

Bad for wildlife
The border passes through some of the most biologically diverse regions of the U.S., including the bootheel of New Mexico and lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

The wall will block the movements of thou-

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Help us stop the wall
The proposed border wall would be a disaster for wildlife. Bighorn sheep, ocelots, jaguarundi, pronghorn, black bears, even pygmy owls—these are just some of the many species that would find the wall impossible to cross.

We’re not overstating this. The wall is a recipe for extinction. It will fragment habitat, divide populations, and prevent wildlife from reaching resources they need to survive. It will keep Mexican wolves endangered forever, and stop jaguars from recolonizing their historic habitat in the Southwest.

We wouldn’t be much of a wildlife advocacy group if we didn’t do all we could to stop it.

We need your help! Please consider making a contribution of $50, $100 or whatever you can afford today to SWEC’s Stop the Wall Campaign. Your support will help us scale up our efforts including:

• Hire a full-time anti-wall organizer to mobilize the public against the wall;
• Organize rallies, talks and a Border Wall Summit to raise national attention;
• Implement a billboard campaign to engage the millions of travelers who travel on I-10 through NM and AZ.

We’ve enclosed a handy envelope inside for you to use, or you can make a secure online donation at wildmesquite.org.

For more information, please contact ashley@wildmesquite.org, or call (575) 522-5552. Thank you!
SWEC Gearing Up for Renewed Battle Over Otero Mesa

by Peter Sloan

What ever happened to Otero Mesa? Nothing, yet, and we plan to keep it that way!

For over 15 years, the Southwest Environmental Center and coalition partners have been campaigning to protect the ecologically vital and visually stunning grassland region in southern New Mexico from natural gas development.

We’ve succeeded so far, but Otero Mesa is not secure yet.

Otero Mesa contains what some say is the largest remaining desert grassland in the U.S., providing habitats for a rich variety of plant and animal species, including those that are in decline elsewhere. Pronghorn, the second-fastest land mammal on Earth (after the cheetah), roam the Mesa in the hundreds, and prairie dog colonies dot the landscape.

As habitats have disappeared elsewhere, grassland birds still find refuge on Otero Mesa, in turn providing a prey base for the endangered Aplomado Falcon. Dozens of species of lizards and snakes call Otero Mesa home, and there is a high diversity of cactus and wildflower species too.

Unfortunately, not everyone recognizes the ecological value of Otero Mesa. In the past, the BLM has proposed opening up to 90% of federally-owned land in the area to fluid mineral (oil and gas) leasing.

This development involves clearing well pads and drilling wells, clearing corridors and constructing pipelines, and constructing sumps for wastewater and other waste materials. Seismic exploration is sometimes used to map natural gas deposits; heavy vehicles drive off existing roads, detonating explosives to produce shock waves to detect what’s underneath the surface.

But maybe the biggest threat development poses to Otero Mesa is the construction of roads and the resultant fragmentation of habitats and impacts to wildlife. The BLM estimates that fluid mineral development on Otero Mesa would lead to 350 new miles of road being built over 20 years. And for every mile of road, a nearly 1,000-acre zone of disturbance is created around it, degrading habitats and causing wildlife populations to plummet.

The BLM Las Cruces District Office (LCDO) is currently tasked with revising a Tri-County Resource Management Plan (RMP) for Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana counties. We expect the LCDO to release a draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, which will be incorporated into the draft RMP, in January of 2018. Then, following a public comment period, a final TriCounty RMP will be issued, including management prescriptions for Otero Mesa.

SWEC’s immediate goal is the protection of Otero Mesa from natural gas extraction, via special designations and management prescriptions in the RMP. We and coalition partners have submitted proposals for a large Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to protect the grasslands, as well as Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWCs) which the BLM is required by law to inventory.

Our hope is that the BLM will protect these areas through management decisions that put them off limits to development. Our long term goal is permanent protection.

In the coming months, SWEC will be monitoring the BLM’s progress and keeping the public informed. We have already met with the LCDO staff and will be organizing field tours of Otero Mesa in the fall. We are submitting sign-on letters to the BLM in support of protecting Otero Mesa and will be producing educational materials for local schools.

And we are hosting a photography exhibit in our Cottonwood Gallery in August and September, featuring images of the wildlife, landscapes, sky, and cultural sites of Otero Mesa.

Our goal is to engage the public in the BLM’s planning process and ensure the Resource Management Plan includes the management prescriptions needed to protect this special place.

SWEC is committed to the permanent protection of wild places like Otero Mesa. Sign up for our weekly emails or follow SWEC on Facebook to stay informed and get involved with the campaign to protect Otero Mesa.

Contact peter@wildmesquite.org for more info.
2017 Legislative Defeats Set Stage for Victories in 2019

The Southwest Environmental Center supported a number of important wildlife bills this year at the New Mexico Legislature. Although none made it into law, we gained momentum and have reason to be optimistic about our prospects in 2019 during the next “long” session, when New Mexico will have a new governor.

Coyote Killing Contest Ban (SB 268)

SWEC has been advocating for legislation that would ban wildlife killing contests for six years now (that’s three long sessions of the New Mexico legislature) and each time we get closer to our goal. SB 268, this year’s bill sponsored by Senators Jeff Steinborn [D-Las Cruces] and Mark Moores [R-Albuquerque], made it further than its predecessors, passing a floor vote in the Senate, clearing committee and being sent to a floor vote in the House. However, due to time constraints at the end of the session, it did not get a floor vote and died.

Moving legislation is a long, iterative process. SB 268 went further than similar bills have in the past. It had bipartisan support at every stage: sponsors, committee votes, and on the Senate floor. In the Senate, it passed 26-15. Two years ago, the coyote killing contest ban died in committee in the House; this year, it passed House Judiciary easily, with an 8-4 vote across party lines. There is a good chance it would have passed a floor vote.

While we are disappointed we didn’t see SB 268 signed into law this year, we are in position to do so in 2019. We plan to see this through.

Protection for All Species (SB 266)

Currently, only about 60% of the New Mexico’s vertebrate species are protected by state law, including only 20% of mammals. SB 266, introduced by Senator Jeff Steinborn, would have closed this gap, and changed state policy to protect wildlife as a public trust resource for all New Mexicans, including future generations. SWEC’s executive director Kevin Bixby served as Steinborn’s expert witness.

NM Department of Game and Fish director Alexi Sandoval opposed the bill, calling it an “unfunded mandate” that would have required hunters and anglers to pay for the conservation of nongame species. The bill was shot down in the Senate Conservation Committee.

Game Commission Reform

A bill to reform the New Mexico Game Commission (HB 254, introduced by Rep. Matthew McQueen, D-Bernalillo) was defeated by a 6-5 vote along party lines in the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee, with Republicans voting against it. The measure would have taken some of the politics out of the commission by taking four appointments from the governor and giving them to the Legislature, and would have protected all members from being removed without cause. It would have broadened representation on the commission by reserving one seat each for a non-hunter/angler, scientist, sportsmen and farmer/rancher, with three open seats. The bill was backed by a coalition of hunting, conservation and animal rights groups, including SWEC.

Public Land Ban on traps, snares and poisons

SB 286, introduced by Senator Pete Campos, would have banned leghold traps, snares and poisons on public lands in New Mexico. The bill was supported by a broad coalition of conservation groups including SWEC but opposed by sportsmen’s organizations and the NMDGF. Campos pulled the bill after concerns were raised by both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate Conservation Committee.

Wildlife Trafficking

Finally, SB 81, introduced by Democrats Gail Chasey and Mimi Stewart, was designed to tamp down on wildlife product trafficking through New Mexico’s ports of entries. The United States is one of the world’s largest consumers of illegal wildlife products, and the current patchwork of national and international laws is incomplete and difficult to enforce, making state-level laws necessary. SB 81 passed the House and Senate but was not signed into law by the Governor.

SWEC is committed to wildlife management reform at the state level, and we won’t stop until good bills like these become law.

For more info, contact kevin@wildmesquite.org.

Good News, Bad News for Mexican Wolves

Mexican gray wolves (“lobos”) are struggling to hang on, with only about 130 living in the wild, all dangerously closely related.

Scientists have warned that the only way to save the subspecies is to release more captive bred wolves immediately to augment the wild population and increase genetic diversity. Unfortunately, politics has prevented this from happening.

In 2016, the state of New Mexico sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to block further releases in the state. In April of 2017, the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against the state and said FWS did not need New Mexico’s blessing to continue releasing wolves. That’s the good news.

However, the long-awaited draft recovery plan released by FWS in June is a different story. It certainly is not based on the best available science. For example, biologists say that to achieve full recovery, there must be a minimum of 750 Mexican wolves in the wild, distributed in three separate but genetically connected populations located in the Gila region of Arizona and New Mexico, the Grand Canyon area of Arizona and Utah, and the southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado and New Mexico.

By contrast, the draft recovery plan sets a recovery goal of only 490 wolves in two populations, one in Arizona and New Mexico (320 wolves), and one in Mexico (170 wolves), and none in Utah or Colorado.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the plan is that it abdicates FWS’ responsibility to recover lobos under the federal Endangered Species Act to the states: “[T]he states of New Mexico and Arizona, and the Mexican government, will determine the timing, location and circumstances of [releasing] wolves into the wild.”

With the states in charge, this plan has the potential to be an extinction plan, not a recovery plan. Email peter@wildmesquite.org for more information.
Border Wall
(continued from front page)

sands of species of wildlife, ranging in size from snakes to mountain lions. It will prevent access to vital sources of water, food and mates.

Jaguars, Mexican wolves, Sonoran pronghorn, ocelots, jaguarundis, and pygmy owls are just a few of the many endangered species that would be harmed.

It’s not just the wall itself, but the associated activities that will also impact wildlife, such as clearing of vegetation, lights and vehicle activity.

Bad for environment

The border straddles some rugged, wild terrain. Already the border wall has caused flooding and erosion problems by disrupting natural drainage patterns. Border patrol off-road vehicles have already torn up many acres of wildlands in Arizona.

Disrespect for law

In 2005, Congress gave the Secretary of DHS authority under the Real ID Act to waive ALL laws—federal, state and local—as needed to expedite construction of the wall.

This has been called the broadest waiver ever granted by Congress to the executive branch. It has been invoked five times by DHS to exempt itself from 35 laws in order to build the nearly 700 miles of existing wall and barriers, waiving such laws as the Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act.

Based on a lie

The border wall is part of a larger militarization of the border region which includes putting more “boots on the ground,” more aggressive deportation policies, and more immigrant detention facilities, which are a windfall for the private prison industry.

The justification for all of these measures is the false idea, promoted solely for political reasons, that the border is somehow a lawless region that is out of control. In reality, border cities such as El Paso are some of the safest in the country.

Ironically, construction of the wall using the waiver authority given to DHS has succeeded in making the border literally lawless, in places where the wall has been built.

President Trump appears determined to go forward with this harmful boondoggle. His administration has requested $1.6 billion for wall construction in the 2018 budget.

SWEC is equally determined to stop him.
SWEC Hires Local Youths to Restore Wildlife Habitats

A crew of six young people ages 20-25 are helping to restore wildlife habitat at the Southwest Environmental Center’s La Mancha Wetland Project located along the Rio Grande near Mesilla, NM.

The group was hired in February for six months using a NM Youth Conservation Corps grant awarded to SWEC. They have been working at La Mancha to remove non-native plants, plant native species, and design and construct trails, vehicle barriers, information signs and a wildlife viewing blind.

They have also been working to build and install bat houses at La Mancha and on land managed by the City of Las Cruces behind Las Cruces Dam.

The mission of the YCC is to promote the education, success and well-being of the youth of New Mexico through the conservation and enhancement of the state’s natural resources and lasting community benefits.

“SWEC is a great program,” said Kevin Bixby, SWEC’s executive director. “It employs young people, pays them well, and gives them a chance to learn valuable job skills while doing important work.”

“This is a really great crew,” said Crew Supervisor Chris Schaefer. “They get along well, work hard, and are really enthusiastic about helping the environment. We are getting a lot done.”

SWEC Hosts Film Premiere in Las Cruces

In January, the Southwest Environmental Center hosted the premiere screening of Unfair Game: Ending the War on Wildlife, a new documentary on coyote killing contests produced by Project Coyote, a California-based nonprofit and partner of SWEC.

The film, which also screened in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, features interviews with scientists, activists (including SWEC’s executive director Kevin Bixby), ranchers, hunters, public officials, and indigenous people, and focuses on dispelling myths about coyote killing contests. It also tells the story of the successful grassroots movement that led to the regulation of these contests in California, by banning the awarding of prizes.

After the film, the audience in the Rio Grande Theater participated in a lively panel discussion moderated by Bixby, including Project Coyote executive director Camilla Fox, Project Coyote science advisory Dave Parsons, New Mexico State Senator Jeff Steinborn, and hunter and conservation advocate David Soules.

The event was part of SWEC’s multi-faceted campaign to pass a bill banning coyote killing contests in New Mexico. We weren’t successful in passing the bill this year, but public awareness is rapidly growing on the issue. It’s only a matter of time.
Back by Noon Outings

SWEC’s Back by Noon guided Saturday morning outings are a great way to get to know the natural attractions of the Las Cruces-El Paso area. Here are some photos from our Spring, 2017 series. Look for the Fall series to begin in late August.

Want to help protect wildlife while you shop?

You can help the Southwest Environmental Center without spending an extra dime by using these great alternative giving programs!

AmazonSmile

Now more than ever, smart shoppers are looking for ways to stretch every dollar. In these uncertain economic times, we all face hard choices as we plan for special occasions, holiday gifts, and charitable giving. With AmazonSmile you don’t have to choose between buying something or sending a donation to Southwest Environmental Center. Now you can buy the things you need, save money with exclusive Amazon coupons and deals, and feel good knowing that a portion of each purchase benefits our organization. This easy-to-use program donates a portion of any sales made through Amazon to SWEC. Just visit smile.amazon.com to get started (make sure to select SWEC as your charity!)

iGive

Every time you shop at any of the 1,700+ online stores in the iGive network, a portion of the money you spend benefits the Southwest Environmental Center. It’s a free service, and you’ll never pay more when you reach a store through iGive. In fact, smart shoppers will enjoy iGive’s repository of coupons, free shipping deals, and sales. To get started, just create your free iGive account. Start iGiving at: www.iGive.com/SWEC

For more information about these giving programs, please contact ashley@wildmesquite.org or call 575.522.5552.

Avid hiker and owner of Geo Betty tours Don Baumgardt led our outing to Anthony Gap Cave in the Franklin Mountains.

Taking advantage of the acoustics at Achenbach Canyon Cave, a trip led by avid outdoorsman David Soules.

A Texas horned lizard discovered on our “Reptiles of the Chihuahuan Desert” outing led by herpetologist Niki Herrings.

SWEC’s summer interns Alex Serna (L) and Kathia Gonzalez are conducting ecological monitoring at La Mancha Wetland. Kendall Anderson (not shown) is helping to produce videos and boost our social media efforts.
Meet Our Volunteers

Gloria Kindig is a new volunteer at SWEC. She enjoys coming into the office each week, and she is helping us translate all of our fact sheets and educational materials into Spanish. We’re excited that Gloria’s work will help us reach a wider community.

Gloria spent her career in the classroom, with 21 years’ experience teaching in Las Cruces public schools. She is a graduate of New Mexico State University, and has Master’s degrees in science and language instruction. She loves inspiring the next generation to get into science, and still works as a science education facilitator and leads rocket-building workshops for girls.

Gloria volunteers because she believes in SWEC’s mission of protecting wildlife and wild places. She doesn’t like wildlife killing contests, and she remembers when the lower Rio Grande habitat was much healthier than it is today.

SWEC couldn’t do what we do without our volunteers. To get involved, visit www.mesquite.org, email peter@wildmesquite.org, or call (575) 522-5552.

Meet Our Staff

Cindy Laatch is SWEC’s new office manager. Cindy grew up in southern New Mexico and graduated from NMSU with an accounting degree. After obtaining her CPA license in Austin, TX, she moved to Santa Fe to work for the state. She and her family moved to Wisconsin in 1995 where she was controller for a manufacturing company.

The desire for warmer winters took her to the gulf coast of Mississippi where she was CFO for two related non profit corporations.

Twenty years away from NM was too long, so she and her husband moved back in 2016.

As a longtime financial supporter of environmental causes, Cindy is thrilled to be working for SWEC.

Meet Our Members

Elaine McThompson is a new SWEC member who lives in El Paso, TX. She grew up in Aiken, South Carolina and spent her childhood hiking in the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains. She studied nursing at Brown Mackie College in Greenville, SC. She and her husband moved to El Paso 14 years ago.

After discovering that her son had a mental illness, she decided that she wanted to be a mental health advocate and change the stigma around mental illness. She now volunteers as a teacher for the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Elaine also volunteers at the El Paso Zoo. She says, “I appreciate the conservation education that the El Paso Zoo has to offer.”

“I am proud to support the Southwest Environmental Center,” Elaine says. “I love that they advocate for wildlife and their habitats. It’s important that we educate the next generation about conservation. I’ve been telling my son not to squish the paper wasps and the other day he brought me one that he saved from the pool. The things that I’m passionate about they will be passionate about and I try to be an example for them. You have to give back to get back.”

We’re proud to count Elaine as one of our new members.

Don’t miss out

Do we have your email address? The best way to stay informed about SWEC events and issues is to sign up for our weekly eNewsletter. You can do it at wildmesquite.org or call us at (575) 522-5552.
Lucky Placitas woman wins new car in SWEC’s Prius raffle

Ruth Wheeler of Placitas, NM, is the lucky winner of a new 2017 Prius C in our annual fundraising raffle. Her ticket was pulled on April 22 at the Las Cruces Earth Day Fair.

Ruth is a retired CPA from Ohio. She has lived in New Mexico since 2006. She served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, and worked for the Peace Corps as an administrator in Turkmenistan.

Ruth says she loves wildlife and is a big supporter of SWEC’s work, especially our efforts on behalf of Mexican wolves.

Thanks to everyone who purchased a ticket in our raffle this year. The annual raffle is our largest fundraiser of the year. We sold all 500 tickets and raised nearly $30,000. Even though only one person won the car, you are all winners in our book!

Thanks to Vescovo Toyota of Las Cruces for helping to make this fundraiser possible.