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TOP STORY **EDITOR'S PICK** **TOPICAL**

Trump administration: Build 25 miles of new border wall across Arizona grassland

Tony Davis

Apr 16, 2025

The Trump administration is seeking bidders for a contract to build about 25 miles of border wall through the San Rafael Valley — a hotly disputed area with one of the longest remaining stretches of Arizona borderlands without a wall.

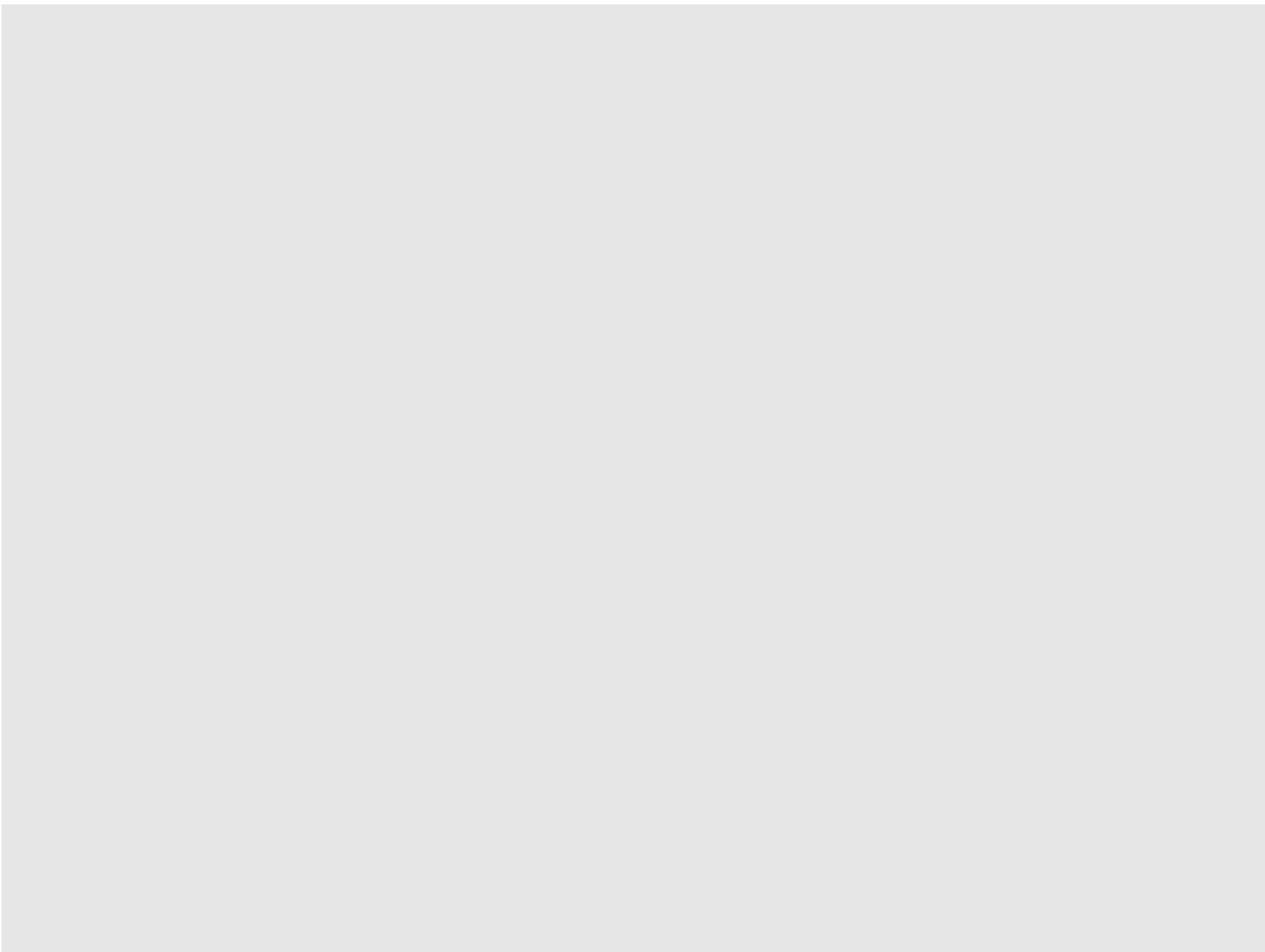
A spokesman for Customs and Border Protection confirmed Tuesday an emailed report the Sierra Club said it received from CBP three days earlier — that it plans to build 24.7 miles of wall between the Nogales Border Patrol Station in Santa Cruz County and the town of Naco south of Bisbee in Cochise County. The area is a known biodiversity hotspot but is also populated by ranchers concerned about unauthorized immigration into the area.

“Additional information will be released when we announce the successful bidder,” John Mennell, a CBP spokesman, said Tuesday, adding he can’t say at this time when the agency intends to start construction.

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A cowboy moves cattle on a ranch in Lochiel in the San Rafael Valley in this 2019 photo. The Trump administration is seeking bidders for a contract to build about 25 miles of border wall through the San Rafael Valley — a hotly disputed area with one of the longest remaining stretches of Arizona borderlands without a wall.

Josh Galemore, Arizona Daily Star 2019

The Department of Homeland Security, CBP's parent agency, "is working to implement President Trump's executive orders on securing the borders and declaring a national emergency at the southern border of the United States. He has directed the secretary (of DHS) to take all appropriate actions to deploy and construct temporary and permanent physical barriers, to insure complete operational control of the southern border of the United States," Mennell said.

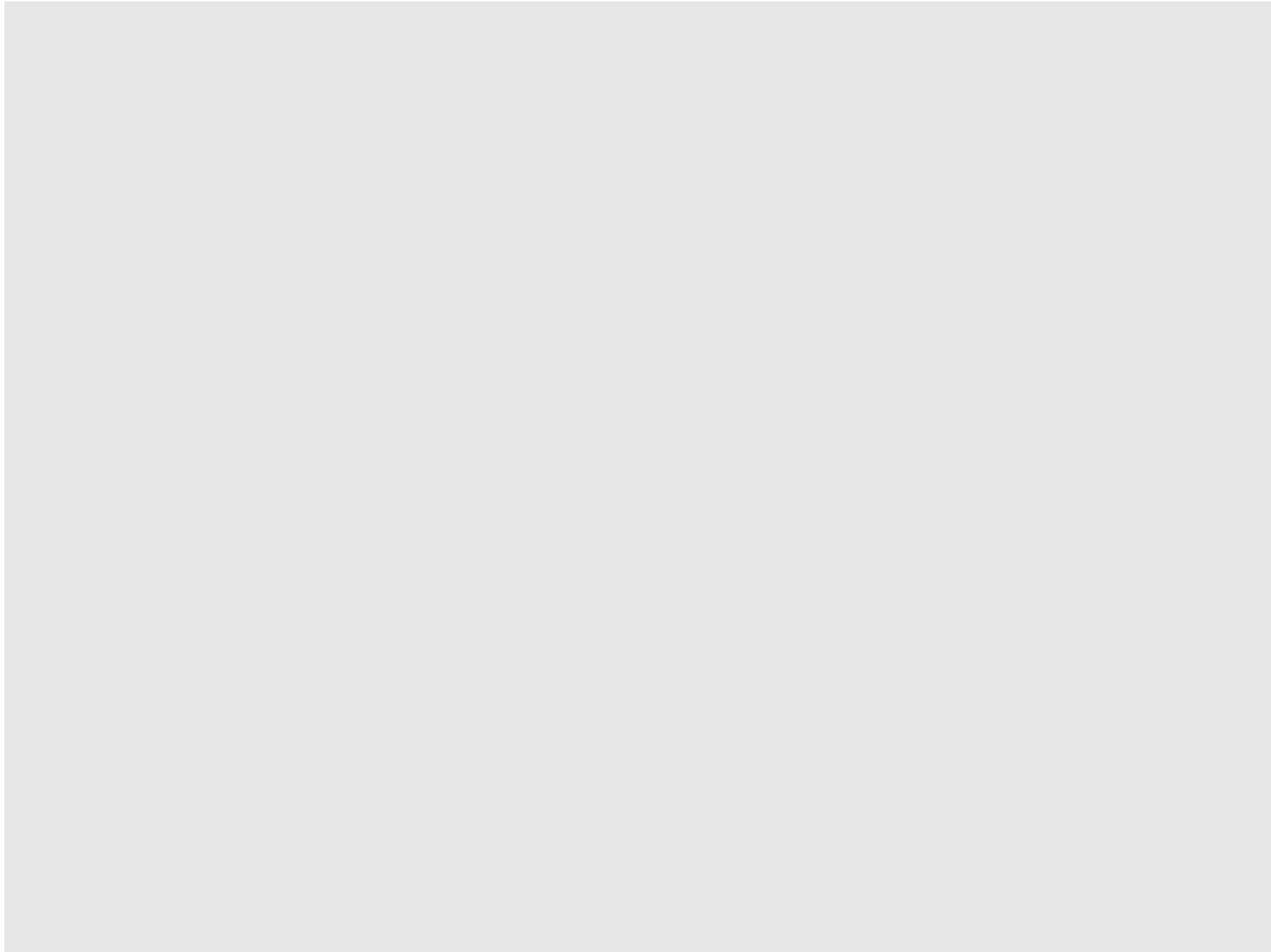
The plan for new border wall comes as unauthorized border crossings across the entire U.S. Southwest, including Arizona, are at record lows, according to a Customs and Border Protection news release earlier this month.

In the agency's entire Tucson Sector, which spans 262 border miles, much more than the nearly 25-mile stretch now targeted for new border wall, the agency had 1,336 encounters with migrants in February, a 97% decrease from February 2024. The sector has approximately 3,700 border agents, CBP says. There were 1,068 apprehensions by border agents in March in the Tucson Sector. There were 1,500 pounds of drugs, including 430 pounds of fentanyl, seized in March in the Tucson Sector.

The San Rafael Valley stretch is one of the largest and lushest remaining spans of native grassland in Southern Arizona.

It also includes large areas of the Patagonia and Huachuca mountains and has been the scene of three recent border crossings of the endangered jaguar, including that of the cat nicknamed El Jefe. He roamed the Santa Ritas north of this area from 2012 through 2015. Endangered ocelots also have been photographed in the area. It is also the natural setting where the 1955 movie "Oklahoma" was filmed.

Now, environmentalists fear all construction through the valley will trigger what one of them, Russ McSpadden of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, called “ecocide.”



Old border posts line the U.S./Mexico line near Lochiel in the San Rafael Valley.

Josh Galemore, Arizona Daily Star 2019

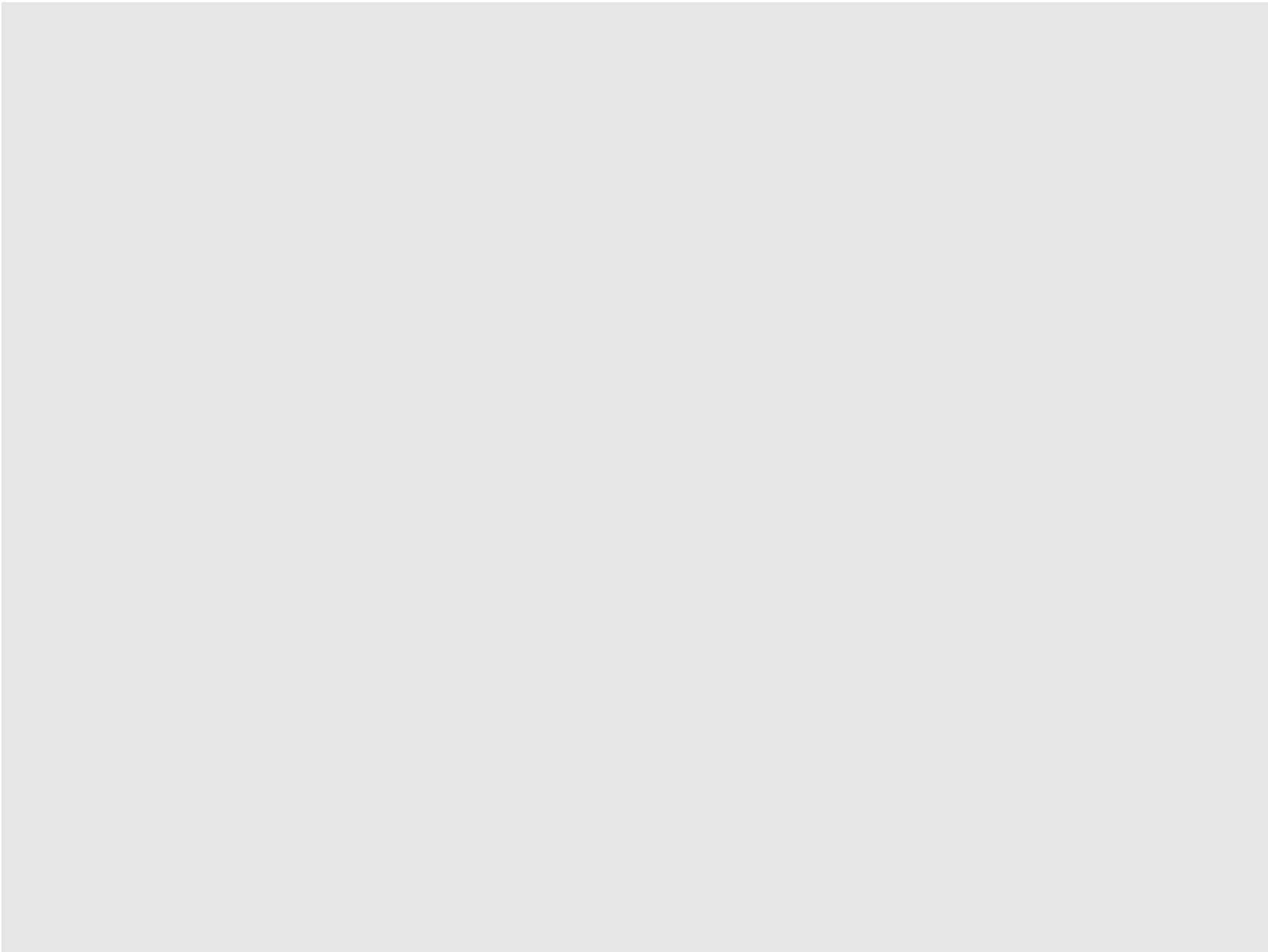
“There are significant conservation lands on both sides of the border,” McSpadden told the Star Tuesday. “It’s one of the best wildlife corridors left in this region. It’s one of the worst places you can put a border wall. It’s a quiet valley. There are not that many border crossers there at all. It’s rugged country.”

Sidney Spencer, who sells grass-fed beef from her Lazy J2 Ranch in the valley’s center about 8 miles from the border, begs to differ. She favors a border wall and said, “I think if they put their noodles to it, they can figure out something to let the jaguars cross through.”

“I’ve been here 30 years and the drug lords have controlled this valley as long as I’ve lived here,” Spencer said. “They know who I am, where I am, when I’m home and not home. It’s a drug alley. It always has been.”

This project will be among the 85 miles of new border barriers from California to Texas that were funded with “prior year” appropriations, a CBP spokesman said. Most if not all of those were approved by Congress during the first Trump administration, since President Joe Biden halted border wall construction shortly after taking office. The new fencing includes projects within the Border Patrol’s Tucson, Yuma, San Diego, El Paso and Rio Grande Valley sectors, the spokesman said.

“CBP’s goal for its environmental planning efforts is balancing environmental concerns while ensuring the expeditious construction of new border barriers to deter illegal crossings in areas of high illegal entry into the United States,” the spokesman said.



A cattle ranch in the San Rafael Valley. The area, now targeted for new border wall construction, is a known biodiversity hotspot but is also populated by ranchers concerned about unauthorized immigration into the area.

Josh Galemore, Arizona Daily Star 2019

The Sierra Club got word of the impending border wall project in an email Friday from a CBP official. The two entities have been in contact for several years as they sought to implement a legal settlement stemming from a lawsuit the club filed over the wall during the first Trump administration. The federal government is still considering proposed amendments to the settlement agreement involving various projects at the Santa Cruz River and the Coronado National Memorial and opening additional gates to let storm water pass through various border barriers in Arizona and New Mexico, the CBP official told the Sierra Club. The club didn't identify that official, to protect the person as a source of information.

"CBP is planning to construct approximately 24.7 miles of new primary barrier in the Sonoita Station Area of Responsibility," covering the area from the Nogales Border Patrol Station to Naco, said the email excerpt released by the Sierra Club.

Erick Meza, the Sierra Club's borderlands coordinator, said, "This valley, this represents one of the major biodiversity hotspots on the Southern border. It's the birthplace of the Santa Cruz River (which starts in this area, then flows south into Mexico before resuming its northward path in Nogales, Sonora).

"This is an area where a lot of very sensitive species live and use as a wildlife corridor," including black bears, mule deer and white-tailed deer, and pronghorns as well as jaguars and ocelots, he said. "Blocking 25 miles of this landscape will sever connectivity for countless animals, pushing already vulnerable species closer to extinction. This is going to be one of the worst pieces of news for the environment we can get here in Arizona," Meza said.

Rancher Spencer, however, said Tuesday that, “While I like to invite people into my home, I want to know who I’m inviting. I believe in immigration. I want it to be done in the right way. I know families who spend 10 years getting green cards, their citizenship, doing it the right way. What we oughta fix is the system for getting a green card or getting permission to work here.”

Overall, Carol Bonchalk, a resident of the San Rafael Valley since 2005, said “I could go either way” on the border wall issue, and she wants more facts about the planned construction project before taking a stance.

“I think we need more things across the border. We’ve had fires started by illegals, which caused problems for everybody. There needs to be some kind of protection, although we’ve had better protection since they put 100-foot towers up across the valley,” Bonchalk said.

“I agree there will be a problem for wildlife. I don’t know what the solution is. It’s a catch 22 no matter which way they go. You need some protection but you need some ability for wildlife to cross.”

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By Tony Davis

Reporter