

IMMIGRATION

Biden says the border wall is ineffective. Here are key things to know.



By [Nick Miroff](#)

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The Biden administration last week placed itself in the position of trying to explain how its decision to fast-track new construction of barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border — which officials called an urgent necessity — did not amount to a policy reversal.

After all, the president pledged during the 2020 campaign that he would not build “another foot” of the barrier. One of Biden’s executive orders on his inauguration day brought President Donald Trump’s signature project to a grinding halt, with the new president calling that effort to keep migrants from crossing into the United States a waste of money.

The environmental groups and others who cheered that decision were dismayed to see Biden officials announce Oct. 5 that they would waive environmental and conservation laws for the first time to install roughly a dozen segments totaling 17 miles of new barriers in South Texas.

When reporters asked Biden whether he thought border barriers were effective, the president flatly said “no.” His certainty seemed squarely at odds with the Department of Homeland Security’s notice calling new border wall segments urgently needed “to prevent unlawful entries into the United States.”

WHAT TO KNOW

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Does the border wall reduce illegal entry into the U.S.?

The Trump administration installed more than 450 miles of new border fencing during Trump's 2017-2021 term. Along most of that span, the project consisted of replacing low-rise barriers, designed to stop vehicles, with 30-foot-tall steel bars, or bollards, anchored in a concrete base.

At a cost of \$11 billion, it was one of the most expensive federal infrastructure projects in American history. Despite that steel and concrete, illegal border crossings have soared from about 500,000 per year in 2020 to more than 2 million per year, the highest levels ever.

Biden's critics primarily blame his decision to reverse Trump's measures for the surge. In addition to halting wall construction, Biden reduced deportations, ended Trump's "Remain in Mexico" program and canceled agreements that allowed U.S. authorities to send some asylum seekers to Central America.

The fact remains that the U.S. government spent a lot of money to build new barriers to keep migrants out and did not get the result it wanted.

Trump said the wall would be 'impenetrable.' It's huge. Don't walls work?

Trump used a lot of hyperbole to promote his pet project and was prone to describe the barrier as the personification of his presidency. He took a keen interest in its aesthetic appearance and design features, often urging aides to make it look as imposing as possible. He told supporters his wall would be "impenetrable." He also said Mexico would pay for it (Mexico did not).

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials didn't make such claims and weren't surprised when criminal smuggling organizations in Mexico began sawing through the steel bars — using ordinary power tools — almost immediately.

The border wall has been hacked through thousands of times since then, so often that the government has had to deploy welding crews full-time to shore up the structural integrity of the barrier. Smugglers have figured out a cheaper and even easier way to defeat it, fashioning cheap, disposable ladders out of scrap wood or metal rebar. They send migrants and drug couriers up and over the top, then use ropes to lower them down the other side. Experienced fence-jumpers have developed a technique using the steel bars like fire poles, sliding down onto the U.S. side in seconds.

Is the border wall actually along the border?

In New Mexico, Arizona and California, the border wall is located at the international boundary with Mexico.

In Texas, the border is defined by the long, looping path of the Rio Grande, presenting a major challenge to engineers trying to build a steel-and-concrete fence in a straight line.

At some locations in South Texas where the Rio Grande is especially sinuous, the government has built the wall more than a mile from the international border. That has left hundreds, if not thousands, of acres of U.S. territory — mostly farmland — in no man's land that is inside the United States but outside the border wall.

The river's topography has made the structure essentially useless for addressing one of the most taxing challenges facing the U.S. Border Patrol: large groups of migrants, often parents with children, crossing illegally to surrender and seek humanitarian protection.

Once migrants cross the river and reach U.S. soil, they have a right to seek asylum under U.S. law. The Border Patrol has little choice but to take them into custody, even if they're on the opposite side of the wall.

The United States has no intention of ceding that territory or allowing makeshift migrant camps to form on the U.S. side of the river. So border agents open the gates and bring migrants through the wall by the busload.

If the border wall is ineffective, why do U.S. agents say they want it?

CBP officials were asking for more physical barriers long before Trump promised a "big, fat, beautiful wall" when he ran for office in 2016. Such projects enjoyed bipartisan support a generation ago; the Secure Fence Act of 2006 passed the Senate and House by large margins.

There's a big difference between how Trump and some Republicans talk about the wall and the more technical way CBP officials describe physical barriers — as a tool but not the *only* tool. Agents assigned to work in difficult conditions along the border would rather have some sort of barrier than nothing at all. It gives them a way to channel and redirect some illegal activity, control crowds and block vehicles.

Just as important, the barriers create new access roads, increasing agents' ability to quickly arrive to locations where smuggling and illegal entry are detected.

Ronald Vitiello, the former Border Patrol chief who helped develop plans for the wall, said the structure "in and of itself, is nothing."

"But it's an anchor for all the other things you need to do," Vitiello said, including technology such as cameras and sensors. "It doesn't stop things, but it slows them down," he said.

And at a time of record crossings and a fair amount of border chaos, many agents say they are relieved to have some sort of structure in place to help them manage a desperate and frustrating situation.

Will this be the first time Biden has built new border wall?

No. Biden's "pause" on the border wall in January 2021 left unfinished gaps in the structure and construction materials lying around in the desert. DHS has been spending barrier funds appropriated by Congress to close some of those segments, and officials have spent about \$1 billion on environmental remediation to reduce erosion and restore some of the areas torn up by bulldozers and dynamite.

In June, Biden officials announced plans to build the new segments in South Texas, but the controversy flared up last week when they laid out plans to waive more than two dozen environmental and conservation laws.

Why is Biden building the wall if he thinks the barrier is ineffective?

Biden officials say they are compelled by law because Congress appropriated money for these border wall segments in 2019 as part of the deal to end the last government shutdown. The Biden administration tried to reprogram those funds, but that attempt was rejected by lawmakers. The deadline to spend the money was Sept. 30.

CBP officials said they had no choice but to waive the environmental and conservation laws because it is the only way the agency has been able to build barriers in the past. And they insist the new segments will mitigate environmental impacts by using a design consisting of 18-foot bollards on a movable base that can be easily repositioned.

The new segments, which will cost about \$140 million, will be located outside the flood plain of the Rio Grande, nearly a mile from the river, and mostly positioned along existing roads, according to a CBP official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss construction plans that have not been publicly announced.

Luis Miranda, a DHS spokesman, said the administration's description of the barrier as an urgent necessity was a legal formality tied to Congress's 2019 border wall appropriation.

"It is not a statement of the Administration's policy," Miranda said in a statement. "As a matter of policy, the Administration disagrees with Congress's 2019 mandate and continues to oppose further border wall construction."

"Nevertheless, DHS must and will comply with the law," he said.

Is the wall harmful?

Dozens of migrants have been killed and hospitalized after falling from the structure, often with horrific spinal trauma and broken legs. Immigrant advocates also say the barriers force migrants toward more remote desert areas, contributing to more deaths from heat stroke and exposure. CBP reported 568 migrant deaths along the border during the 2021 fiscal year, the most recent for which data is available — nearly twice the amount of the previous year.

The border wall has a devastating toll on animals too, advocates say. The steel bars have essentially cut in half the habitat of animal species, in some cases cutting off their access to water and grazing areas. Trail cameras set up by researchers have shown pumas, bobcats and other large mammals blocked and searching fruitlessly for some way to get through.

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump's border wall has been breached more than 3,000 times by smugglers, CBP records show



By [Nick Miroff](#)

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NACO, Arizona — Mexican smuggling gangs have sawed through new segments of border wall 3,272 times over the past three years, according to unpublished U.S. Customs and Border Protection maintenance records obtained by The Washington Post under the Freedom of Information Act.

The government spent \$2.6 million to repair the breaches during the 2019 to 2021 fiscal years, the CBP records show. While the agency has acknowledged that smugglers are able to hack through the new barriers built by the Trump administration, the maintenance records show damage has been more widespread than previously known, pointing to the structure's limitations as an impediment to illegal crossings.

Smuggling gangs typically cut the barrier with inexpensive power tools widely available at retail hardware stores, including angle grinders and demolition saws. Once the 18-to-30-foot-tall bollards are severed near the ground, their only remaining point of attachment is at the top of the structure, leaving the steel beam dangling in the air. It easily swings open with a push, creating a gap wide enough for people and narcotics to pass through.

A spokesman for CBP, Luis Miranda, said effective border security “requires a variety of resources and efforts, infrastructure, technology, and personnel.”

“No structure is impenetrable, so we will continue to work to focus resources on modern, effective border management measures to improve safety and security,” Miranda said in a statement.

Along one 25-mile segment of new border wall between Naco and Douglas, Ariz., The Post recently counted 71 bollards with visible repairs and welds. In most instances, crews repaired the breaches using a sleeve-like steel coupler, referred to as a “boot,” to patch over the hole.

Some of the bollards were marked “BREACH” in white lettering, and most had the date of their repairs scrawled just above the welded segments.

John Kurc, a photographer and filmmaker who spent months documenting border wall construction, said he has seen extensive repairs along the wall in Arizona and California.

“I look for little slivers of light at the base of the wall,” said Kurc, who said he has seen sawing crews attack the bollards in broad daylight, sending showers of sparks.

President Donald Trump built 458 miles of new barriers, primarily in remote areas of New Mexico and Arizona. Trump planned to complete roughly 250 additional miles, but President Biden halted construction after taking office.

The Biden administration “continues to call on Congress to cancel remaining border wall funding and instead fund smarter border security measures that are proven to be more effective at improving safety and security at the border,” said Miranda.

Trump promised Mexico would pay for the structure, but his administration spent roughly \$11 billion in taxpayer funds, most of which he diverted from Defense Department accounts. At rallies, Trump likened his wall to a “Rolls-Royce,” but he stopped claiming the barrier was “impenetrable” in 2019 after The Post reported smugglers had learned to saw through it with conventional power tools.

“We have a very powerful wall,” Trump said when asked about the breaches. “But no matter how powerful, you can cut through anything.”

People familiar with the smuggling crews’ tactics say they typically work at night, covering themselves with blankets to hide the sparks and muffle noise. They use radios and lookouts who alert cutting crews when Border Patrol vehicles approach.

The wall’s square bollards are six inches in diameter, with a layer of steel 3/16 of an inch thick. Contractors were required to fill their lower portions with concrete, and in some cases steel rebar, to make sawing more difficult.

A Post reporter encountered bollards at multiple locations that appear to have been left hollow.

After smuggling crews cut through, they often disguise the breaches with tinted putty, making it difficult for agents to recognize which bollards have been compromised. The smugglers can return again and again to the site until the damage is detected, using the breach like a secret entrance.

“They cut it with a fair amount of precision,” said one person with detailed knowledge of the sawing tactics who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters. “You have to look really closely to see it.”

The CBP maintenance records show the cutting crews have been most active in California. The Border Patrol’s El Centro sector has recorded the largest number of breaches, with 1,867, followed by the San Diego sector, with 866. The records provided by CBP are a count of breaches along newer bollard fencing, most of which was added under Trump, not the older “mesh” style fencing that has been even easier for smugglers to cut through.

In March 2021 smugglers hacked through an entire segment of bollard fencing in the El Centro sector, creating an opening wide enough for two SUVs loaded with migrants to drive through. One of the vehicles collided soon after with a truck near Holtville, Calif., killing 13.

CBP maintenance records show the frequency of cutting activity increased as the Trump administration's pace of construction picked up. CBP recorded 891 breaches during fiscal 2019, 906 during fiscal 2020 and 1,475 during fiscal 2021.

"Every bit of infrastructure that I've ever worked around over the past 26 years gets tested," said John Modlin, chief of the Border Patrol's Tucson sector. "At some point, people will try to get past it."

CBP officials say the bollard fencing remains a valuable border security tool when combined with surveillance technology and sufficient personnel. Many of the wall segments where breaching has occurred lack the sensors, cameras and other detection tools called for in original designs, they say. Once those tools are in place, agents will be able to respond faster, they say.

During his presidency, Trump took a personal interest in the construction and design elements of the border wall, seeking frequent progress updates from CBP officials and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He ordered contractors to coat the steel structure in black paint, insisting it would make the barrier hotter to the touch and scald the hands of would-be climbers and cutters, according to his aides.

Advisers warned the paint would drive up maintenance costs and not significantly increase the thermal properties of the steel, but Trump waved them off. The Post observed several locations west of Sasabe, Ariz., where the wall's black paint is already peeling off, less than 18 months after it was applied.

The Border Patrol's El Paso sector announced a "Fence Cutter Initiative" last year in partnership with Mexican prosecutors in Ciudad Juárez to crack down on sawing activity, primarily along an older segment of barrier whose wire mesh design has long made it an easy target.

So far the effort has led to two prosecutions in Mexico, resulting in modest fines but not jail time, said Gloria Chavez, chief of the El Paso sector.

"It's a program that just started," said Chavez. "They go to court, and the judge tells them you either go to jail or you pay a fine. So they pay a fine. But it's something — compared to nothing," she said.

U.S. agents and ranchers who live along the border say climbing, not cutting, has become the most common way smugglers and migrants attempt to get past the barrier in areas where there are no gaps.

The smugglers build tall ladders using scrap wood or metal rebar thin enough to pass between the bollards. They use the ladder to go up the structure, then pass it through the gaps and use it again to climb down onto the U.S. side. They also frequently employ ropes with knots to climb down, and videos on social media show the most athletic climbers have learned to squeeze the bollards between their legs and slide down it like a fire pole.

Along the span between Naco and Douglas, most of the repair welds appear to be dated to last year, with the most recent marked November 2021. At other locations nearby, there were pieces of rope dangling from the top of the barrier, dancing and snapping in the wind.