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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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



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smuggling gangs have sawed through new segments of border wall 3,272 times over the past three years, according to unpublished U.S. Customs and Border Protection maintenance records obtained by The Washington Post under the Freedom of Information Act.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