Why Walls Won’t Work

Walls along the U.S.-Mexico border do not improve national security or address immigration issues. But they are very effective at wasting taxpayer dollars.

By all indications, border walls have failed to stop cross-border smuggling or deter undocumented immigrants. Crossers use ladders to climb over walls, tunnels to go under them, and saws to cut holes through them. According to the US Army Corps of Engineers, “Holes are cut and burrows are dug under the border fence between the United States and Mexico each and every day, and they never seem to end.”

While some imagine that with walls the United States can “secure the border,” the Border Patrol only says that, “A fence will slow people down by a minute or two…” Border Patrol spokesperson Mike Scioli famously said that, “The border fence is a speed bump in the desert.”

“...where fencing has been erected, there have been numerous breaches of the border fencing and a number of tunnels discovered crossing underneath the fencing. It stands to reason that even if border fencing is constructed over a significant portion of the land border, the incidences of fence breaches and underground tunnels would increase.”

Since 1990 more than 140 cross-border tunnels, including some with lights, ventilation, and rail systems, have been discovered.

Smugglers have used cannons and catapults to launch drugs over the wall, and they use saws and torches to cut through them. In California and Arizona sections of the wall wide enough to drive a truck through were removed. Smugglers in Arizona filmed themselves using a car jack to lift a fence panel.

Billions have been spent building border walls, and millions more to repair them. In 2010 alone, Customs and Border Protection paid to fix 4,037 breaches at an average cost of $1,800 per repair.

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7 “Car Jack used to Breach Border Fence.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qnlzj7trz4I
Some point to San Diego’s “triple fence” as the model of an effective border wall that should be emulated from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico. But the Congressional Research Service concluded that, “The primary fence, by itself, did not have a discernible impact on the influx of unauthorized aliens coming across the border in San Diego.”

Walls such as San Diego’s merely reroute cross-border traffic instead of stopping it. The Border Patrol refers to this as “funneling.” Instead of crossing in urban areas, people trek through remote mountains and deserts. This has caused a terrible increase in deaths of migrants, with the Border Patrol recovering more than 6,029 bodies along the border between 1998 and 2013. This number is certainly an undercount since the Border Patrol’s statistics exclude many who perish (for example, if they are recovered by local police instead of Border Patrol agents), and many who die in remote areas are never found.

Most drug smuggling occurs at official border crossings, and border walls have no impact on that.

In addition, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that up to 57 percent of undocumented migrants have overstayed legally obtained visas. The Government Accountability Office has noted that DHS is underestimating the magnitude of the visa overstay problem.

Of those who are apprehended, surveys reveal that between 75% and 90% make another attempt to cross the border after they are deported; only around 34% of would-be border crossers are ultimately unsuccessful and give up.

A border wall will not protect America from terrorism. The Boston Marathon bombers and most of the 9/11 hijackers applied for and received legal visas—and all of these terrorists arrived by air, not by land. Terrorists and cartels are sophisticated, and as such they will not be deterred by low-tech walls.

America needs real solutions to address security and immigration challenges, not ineffective, fiscally draining, and environmentally destructive border walls.

The Sierra Club opposes the waiving of our nation’s environmental laws and the construction of border walls. For more information go to sierraclub.org/borderlands or contact Dan Millis at dan.millis@sierraclub.org.

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