



The California Border Wall's Environmental Toll

Since their inception, walls built along California's border with Mexico have proven ineffective, costly and harmful to our land, air, water and wildlife.

History: the Wall in California

The first border wall began along a 14-mile stretch of California, extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Otay port of entry. It was ten feet tall and built of surplus military landing mats crudely welded together. A second layer, 15-feet tall and made of steel mesh, was later added 150 feet north of the first wall. In the no-man's-land between these two walls there is a graded road for Border Patrol vehicles, with surveillance cameras and stadium lights. In some areas there is a third layer of chain-link fence topped with razor wire.

In 2004 environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, sued to stop the Border Patrol's plan to plug several canyons to create a level path for the border wall. The court found that the Border Patrol was in violation of federal environmental laws and that such a fill project would have a devastating impact on the Tijuana Estuary. In order to override the courts a provision was inserted into the Real ID Act of 2005 giving the Homeland Security Secretary the unprecedented power to waive all federal, state, and local laws, environmental and otherwise, to build border walls.

Walls Threaten the Tijuana River Estuary

A few hundred feet from the border wall's starting point in the Pacific, the Tijuana River Estuary spills into the sea. It is the largest of the remaining salt marshes in Southern California, where over 90% of wetland habitat has been lost to development. The combined Tijuana River Slough National Wildlife Refuge, Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve and Border Field State Park protect sand dunes and beaches, vernal pools, tidal channels, mudflats and coastal sage scrub within their 2,500 acres. Surrounded on three sides by the cities of Imperial Beach, San Diego, and Tijuana, Mexico, the estuary is essential feeding, breeding and nesting grounds for wildlife, and is a key stopover point on the Pacific Flyway for over 370 species of migratory and native birds, including six endangered species.



Smuggler's Gulch filled to make way for the border wall. Photo by Jill Holstin.

During the wet winter season water drains into the marsh from the Tijuana River and surrounding creeks and canyons, infusing the marsh with fresh water and creating a delicate balance on which its many highly sensitive habitats depend. For years the agencies that administer the estuary have had to contend with the polluted runoff of population centers and the effects of Border Patrol actions, including off-road vehicle traffic and lighting.

Following the passage of the Real ID Act the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) no longer needed to obey environmental laws. DHS filled

in the canyon known as Smuggler's Gulch with over 2 million cubic yards of earth that had been ripped from adjacent mountaintops and planted the border wall on top of the berm. With no regulations in place and no oversight by other agencies, DHS put little effort into erosion control, and the bare slopes of the earthen dam threaten to wash tremendous amounts of dirt into the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, which is only 600 feet away. Burying the estuary in sediment may raise its surface level enough to disrupt the twice-daily inundation of sea water upon which its fragile ecosystem depends.

Walls Scar the Otay Mountain Wilderness Area

The Otay Mountain region southwest of San Diego is home to the last stands of Tecate cypress, an ice age tree that survives by absorbing coastal moisture from the air. This tree in turn is the host plant for the rare Thorne's hairstreak butterfly. In an attempt to protect these and other rare and endangered species that inhabit this unique ecosystem, 18,500 acres of the Otay Mountain region were designated a National Wilderness Area.

San Diego Sector Border Patrol spokesman Richard Kite said in 2006, "At the mountain range, you simply don't need a fence. It's such harsh terrain it's difficult to walk, let alone drive. There's no reason to disrupt the land when the land itself is a physical barrier." Ignoring his observation, DHS decided to "disrupt the land" of Otay Mountain Wilderness with 3.6 miles of border wall and more than 5 miles of access road. The rugged terrain of the Wilderness Area necessitated blasting, grading and leveling in order to build the wall and the accompanying road. Because this is clearly incompatible with a wilderness designation, the goal of which was to limit human activity and development, the Otay Mountain Wilderness Act was among the 37 laws that the Department of Homeland Security suspended in 2008 using the Real ID Act. With the wilderness no longer protected by law, DHS blasted through it and built the border wall. Border wall construction caused tremendous erosion, and involved cutting down more than 100 Tecate cypress trees. The Otay Mountain Wilderness Area now suffers from an enormous barren scar and erosion that will harm the Tijuana River watershed for years to come.



Border wall and access road in the Otay Mountain Wilderness Area. Photo by Nathan Trotter.

The Sierra Club Opposes Border Walls

Over 650 miles of border wall have been built along our U.S.–Mexico borderlands, fragmenting endangered species habitat, causing erosion and flooding, and tearing apart fragile ecosystems that had been protected within National Monuments, Wildlife Refuges, and preserves managed by the Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy. The Sierra Club opposes the waiving of our nation's environmental laws and the construction of tremendously destructive border walls. For more information go to sierraclub.org/borderlands or contact Dan Millis at dan.millis@sierraclub.org.