

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-10)

January 22, 2009

The Honorable Janet Napolitano
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Madam Secretary:

As people of faith and stewards of God's great earth, we write with grave concern over the environmental destruction currently occurring in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Nearly one-third of U.S. land along our southern border lies in public hands, including national wildlife refuges, national parks, and national forests. Large swathes of pristine land provide habitat for an abundance of plant and animal life, including many species that are found nowhere else in the U.S. The governments of the U.S. and Mexico have worked together for years to protect this fragile border ecosystem. Now, hasty construction of hundreds of miles of fencing along the border is destroying decades of cooperation and preservation.

On April 1, 2008, the Department of Homeland Security began using a blanket waiver of environmental and land management laws along the U.S.-Mexico border in order to speed construction of the fence. Laws waived included the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Such laws are designed not only to protect wildlife and natural habitats, but to protect human health as well.

We are concerned that continued use of such waivers will cause serious environmental harm. The current path of the border fence cuts through national treasures like *Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument*, in your home state of Arizona, home to over 500 species of plants, 50 species of mammals, and nearly 300 species of birds. Construction of the fence is severing migration routes and destroying thousands of acres of wildlife habitat. In Arizona alone, 39 species protected or proposed to be protected under the Endangered Species Act are being adversely affected by Department of Homeland Security border enforcement operations and deterrence-based infrastructure, including construction of the border fence.

As you assume the helm at DHS, **we urge you to immediately cease using the waiver authority. We further urge you to halt construction of the border fence**, at least temporarily, and conduct a thorough review of enforcement infrastructure and planned construction along the border to analyze its effectiveness and evaluate the environmental, social, economic and cultural impacts of border fence construction and enforcement operations on the environment and on local communities.

In the development and deployment of any border security infrastructure programs, we respectfully urge you to:

1. Require compliance with laws developed to protect the air, water, wildlife, culture, and the health and safety of people in borderland communities.

2. Consult with and fully incorporate the voices and concerns of local communities, Native American tribes, and land management agencies, in the development and implementation of border enforcement policies and programs, including border fence construction.
3. Provide adequate resources to help mitigate damage to borderland wildlife and resources.
4. Engage in rigorous analysis of alternative solutions for border security to address the environmental and humanitarian crisis plaguing our border region.

Construction of the U.S.-Mexico border fence and other border security infrastructure has already caused untold ruin, both to the natural environment and to local communities. We ask you to put a stop to this senseless destruction immediately and reorient the Department of Homeland Security's strategies toward more sensible and humane solutions.

Sincerely,

Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America
Columban Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office
Community Action Program, United Methodist Women
Ecumenical Committee of English Speaking Religious Personnel in Nicaragua
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
Maryknoll Lay Missioners of Oaxaca, MX
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Medical Mission Sisters' Alliance for Justice
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Justice, Peace/Integrity of Creation Office
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches USA
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society