

Oblate JPIC Statement of Opposition to the Proposed Extension of the US/Mexico Border Wall

October 15, 2007

To whom it may concern:

I am writing on behalf of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate is a congregation of Roman Catholic priests and brothers that has had a significant presence on the Mexico/US border for many years. We would like to comment on the RGV Sector EIS, putting on record our deep opposition to the proposed extension of the border wall between Mexico and the United States on environmental, economic and social grounds.

The issues of concern are as follows:

Significant Destruction of Wildlife Habitat: The wall will result in significant destruction of wildlife habitat. The lower Rio Grande Valley has already been cleared of 95% of the brush previously existing. In an area considered one of the most biologically diverse in North America, any additional destruction of brush, including clearing 508 acres for construction of the wall, will have severe consequences for wildlife. Wildlife in the area will be prevented from accessing adequate food and water with their habitat dissected by the wall, as is planned. The disruption of normal habitat poses a significant danger particularly for several endangered & rare species. The ocelot, jaguarundi and red-billed pigeon currently face the real possibility of extinction or extirpation. The ability of rare species such as the ocelot and jaguarundi to cross into Mexico helps to keep wildlife populations healthy by maintaining a level of genetic integrity. Reduction of gene flow among or within populations will reduce the likelihood of long-term survival of these species. A formal Section 7 Consultation under the Endangered Species Act needs to be done.

Additional concerns focus on the unknown impacts of construction, of roads for vehicles and heavy equipment, and of lighting and transmission lines. These should undergo adequate study to determine their environmental impact.

Violation of International Migratory Bird Treaty: If construction of the wall takes place during the spring, as stated in the Federal Register, many migratory and nesting birds will be affected. The clearing of brush will destroy thousands of nests, many with young birds in them. This is in direct violation of the International Migratory Bird Treaty.

Economic Impact: The economic impact of the wall will be significant, as access will be cut off for wildlife enthusiasts interested in wildlife watching, canoeing, kayaking, and hiking along the river. Eco-tourism brings more than

\$125 million to the RGV annually from 200,000 eco-tourists, creating 2,500 jobs in the local economy. The economic impacts of limiting access to refuges, state parks, and other public and private parks and natural areas need to be adequately taken into consideration.

Community impact: A wall could mean uprooting families from their homes and demolishing or cutting off access to historical buildings and community centers. We are concerned with the issues of how many people will lose their homes, what buildings will be destroyed, and how will property owners gain access to their land? On an economic level, what will the presence of a wall do to property values? How will there be public access to cemeteries and historical and archaeological sites along the river? Will there be access in case of fire or other emergencies on the other side of the fence?

Impact on agriculture: Farming is still the backbone of the economy in the Rio Grande Valley. We are deeply concerned about the danger that important agricultural land will be taken out of production by the wall. On a human level, we are concerned about how farmers will gain access to their land, their pumps and irrigation equipment? How will they bring farm equipment onto farmland closed off by the wall?

Impact on flood control: All the walled areas are in a floodplain. Has the Army Corps or DHS coordinated with FEMA on how the wall will affect the flood control levees? Will the IBWC have access to the levees and input in the construction? Will future widening of the levees result in even greater habitat loss on the south side (since the wall is on the north side)?

Relations with Mexico and the rest of the world: Mexico perceives the border wall as an insult. We are deeply concerned about how the wall will affect relations and cooperation between our two countries? In 1990, the world celebrated as the Berlin Wall was finally torn down. It is tragic that the United States is now in the position of creating a similar wall on its southern border. With this wall, what kind of example is the US setting of a free and open democratic society?

Problems with the EIS: The EIS is too limited, geographically. It should look at total and cumulative impacts into the future. We question how the impacts of this initial proposed fencing will change if the total amount of fencing called for by the Secure Fence Act is installed? In addition, there is the question of the environmental impacts of future needs of the wall such as maintenance and lighting?

Inadequate public comment period: The public comment period is less than thirty days. For a project of this magnitude, the public comment period should be extended. The participatory process that the public comment period

represents is vital to our well-being as a functioning democracy. It should not be short-changed.

Thank you for considering our comments and concerns. We hope the process will be opened up significantly to allow time for these concerns to be adequately addressed.

Yours sincerely,

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