

# Trump continues to spend billions on border wall construction amid coronavirus pandemic

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In yet another manifestation of its criminal response, the Trump administration is continuing to spend billions of dollars on border wall construction even as the coronavirus pandemic is overwhelming the United States' health care system.

Last week, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) announced plans to build 150 miles of the 30-ft. wall across the US-Mexico border in Arizona, New Mexico and California. This is in addition to the border wall construction that is being carried out at 15 work sites in these three states as well as Texas.

At a time when the US faces an unparalleled public health crisis, not to mention an economy in free fall that has left millions of Americans unemployed, this decision underscores the hostility of the Trump administration toward the entire working class, native born and immigrant.

COVID-19 has spread rapidly across the country, with the official estimates of confirmed cases crossing 42,000 by Monday. As of this posting, more than a quarter of the American population is living under "shelter-in-place" orders in an attempt to mitigate the pandemic. However, this seems to have had no effect on the administration's fixation with the border wall. In the words of a CBP spokesman, "Wall construction has not been affected."

What this means is that despite all medical advice insisting on the importance of isolation and social distancing, construction crews—comprised of welders, engineers, contractors etc., from states as far-flung as Montana, Maine, North Dakota and Kentucky to name but a few—are working, eating and living in shared, close quarters before returning home to their families. These interactions during the rapidly escalating pandemic makes these workers even more vulnerable to infection and to potentially transmit COVID-19 to

others.

As Myles Traphagen, an ecologist with Wildlands Network, who has urged the congressional appropriations committee to suspend the border wall construction during the pandemic, told *The Guardian*: "There is no sign of construction slowing down, hundreds of construction workers from all over the country and Mexico continue working on the wall, commuting back and forth on weekends, staying in hotels and eating at restaurants in our communities, before returning home and potentially transferring COVID-19. This is a public health hazard and it needs to be stopped."

However, there seems to be no sign of any such stoppage. As of last weekend construction was going full steam ahead in the San Bernardino Valley in Southeast Arizona, the location of a national wildlife refuge, and the habitat for several endangered species whose existence is further threatened by these activities.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in fact, published a notice in the Federal Register last Monday waiving 37 environmental and cultural laws to expedite construction of the 91.5 miles in Arizona, plus 86 miles along other parts of the US-Mexico border. The reason given by acting DHS secretary Chad Wolf for the expedited construction was the supposed "high levels of illegal entry of people and drugs" through Cochise, Santa Cruz, Pima and Yuma counties. Existing measures, the federal government argued, were insufficient because of "a complete absence of barrier or ineffective primary or secondary fencing."

The grotesque absurdity of these claims cannot be overstated. Under the Trump administration, the militarization of the US-Mexico border has proceeded on pace with a series of inhumane measures targeting

working class migrants, particularly from Central America. These have included not just the deployment of US soldiers—who, under Trump’s fraudulent emergency have taken on policing roles—and the refusal of asylum, but also bilateral agreements with Mexico and Central American countries forcing refugees to remain in one of those countries.

Using the pretext of the coronavirus pandemic, the Trump administration has not only closed the US-Mexico border, but also instituted a more systematic “push-back” of immigrants crossing the border outside official ports of entry, claiming that they would pose a potential health threat to other detainees if held in the US.

Over the weekend, a tweet from the Yuma Border Patrol Chief Carl Landrum boasted of the apprehension of “3 adult Mexican males who crossed the border illegally” and the fact that the men were “expeditiously returned to Mexico to #StopTheSpread of #COVID19.” One of the photos posted on his social media account showed him triumphantly standing over a man handcuffed on the ground with his face in the dirt.

If the Trump administration in fact prioritized stopping the spread of COVID-19 it would be much more focused on attending to the horrific cracks in the US public health system that have been exposed by the current crisis. Health care professionals around the country are putting their lives at risk without access to basic supplies like masks and gloves. Hospitals that face the very real prospect of being completely overrun and overwhelmed in the coming weeks are already running short of ventilators. As for simple testing, which should be the highest priority, it remains inaccessible to the working class in most parts of the country. To fixate on the border wall at this moment—a vanity project with an \$18.5 billion price tag—reveals not just the blinkered vision of the current administration, but also the ways in which the pandemic is being harnessed to further Trump’s racist war on immigrants.



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