

March 26, 2020

William Barr  
Attorney General  
Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C., 20530

Dr. Mark T. Esper  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C., 20301

Chad Wolf  
Acting Secretary  
Department of Homeland Security  
301 7th Street, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20528

**RE: An immediate halt to all border wall construction to save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Dear Attorney General Barr, Secretary Esper, and Acting Secretary Wolf,

While communities across the world are fighting the COVID-19 pandemic unlike anything in recent history, your agencies are continuing to divert life-saving resources to further border wall construction. The organizations that co-sign this letter demand that you recognize the life-threatening risks of continuing border wall construction during this crisis and order your Departments to halt it immediately.

Shortly after President Trump declared the coronavirus a national emergency, his administration also announced plans to continue construction in every border state, with 150 miles slated for California, New Mexico, and Arizona and 15 active sites in Texas.<sup>1</sup> Your actions risk government agents and contractors spreading the coronavirus in Southern border communities, place undue strain on border communities whose main focus is survival, and strip away precious resources from the federal government that should be used to respond to the crisis and ensure that communities are prepared to stop the spread of the virus.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/22/construction-us-mexico-border-wall-coronavirus-pandemic>

As of the drafting of this letter, news outlets have reported at least 53,000 cases of COVID-19 across the country, including over 700 fatalities.<sup>2</sup> Well over 3,000 cases of COVID-19 are in southern border states and there are certainly more to come.<sup>3</sup> In counties where border wall construction is ongoing, local governments have issued emergency declarations, in accordance with guidance from federal and state public health authorities, banning gatherings of ten or more individuals. All of California is now under statewide orders to “shelter in place” at home.

Despite this unprecedented public health emergency, across the U.S. border government contractors continue to drop into local communities, erect barriers, and demand to enter and survey private property, including people’s homes. It is unconscionable that during a pandemic, where death rates for some demographics rise as high as 27%<sup>4</sup>, construction crews and government agents continue to gather, enter local communities and engage in a business-as-usual mindset. In the border communities we represent, your agencies’ actions are quite literally endangering the lives of border residents.

In addition to the risk government agents bring to border communities, the border wall also forces border residents to deal with eminent domain proceedings *during* a global crisis. In Texas, most of the land in the path of the border wall is privately owned. How can border residents meaningfully and thoughtfully engage in eminent domain processes in these times of crisis? Yet in recent days the government has filed 3 more motions for takings in South Texas. Residents, especially the elderly, Indigenous tribes, and relatively isolated border communities should not be put in the untenable position of having to stay at home to protect their health while at the same time having to deal with the stress of negotiating land takings for border wall construction.

As of January 2020 the administration amassed over \$10 billion in border wall funding from Defense diversions and in recent months has threatened another \$3.6 billion dollars in diversions for construction.<sup>5</sup> To place these numbers into context, Congress recently allocated \$8 billion for the initial emergency response to the COVID-19’s outbreak in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> For your agencies to continue using vital resources, in a moment where entire industries are reworking their factories just to build masks and ventilators, is beyond the pale. Instead of constructing barriers, the Army Corps of Engineers should use its limited resources to fight the pandemic. Untold lives could be saved if the resources currently used on construction could instead be used for hospitals, clinics, respirators, masks, everything needed to keep our country safe. While millions of everyday people are working to fight a real national emergency, we demand your agencies prioritize their safety in this time.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html#g-cases-by-county>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6912e2.htm?s\\_cid=mm6912e2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6912e2.htm?s_cid=mm6912e2_w)

<sup>5</sup> Customs and Border Protection Border Wall Status Report, March 13, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/06/812964894/where-that-8-3-billion-in-u-s-coronavirus-funding-will-and-wont-go>

While we disagree on the usefulness of the border wall as a matter of policy, we trust that we agree that the pandemic currently enveloping our country and the world requires an all-hands-on-deck response. Today we are asking your Departments to consider their positions in this time of crisis. For the safety of border residents and countless others, we demand you cease all aspects of border wall construction — from legal filings to breaking ground — immediately. The risk COVID-19 presents to our communities, our families, our lives, is simply too great to be ignored for the sake of continuing border wall construction.

Sincerely,

Texas Civil Rights Project  
Al Otro Lado  
Alliance San Diego  
America's Voice  
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action  
Beyond Plastics  
Boise Chapter of Great Old Broads for Wilderness  
Border Crit Institute  
Borderlands Restoration Network  
Carnalismo National Brown Berets  
Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe  
Center for Biological Diversity  
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies  
Central Area Chamber Commerce  
Chispa LCV  
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)  
Coalition on Human Needs  
Coastal Bend Sierra Club  
Community Visions  
Cuenca Los Ojos  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries  
Don't Separate Families  
Earthworks  
Ecotopia  
Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement  
FracTracker Alliance  
FreshWater Accountability Project  
Friends of The Wildlife Corridor/ Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge  
Frontera Audubon Society  
Frontera de Cristo  
Frontera Water Protection Alliance

Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)  
Great Old Broads for Wilderness  
Greater Ajo Community Bill of Rights  
GreenLatinos  
Greenpeace  
Hope Border Institute  
Indivisible  
Inland Ocean Coalition  
Jewish Voice for Peace  
Justice in Motion  
Kitsap Immigrant Assistance Center  
La Union Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)  
Laredo Carnalismo Brown Berets  
Laredo Film Society  
Laredo Immigrant Alliance  
Latin America Working Group  
Latino Community Fund of WA State  
LatinoJustice PRLDEF  
League of Conservation Voters  
Louisiana Bucket Brigade  
LUCHA UTRGV  
Madrean Archipelago Wildlife Center  
Make the Road NY  
Mano Amiga  
MOVE Texas  
National Immigration Law Center  
National LGBTQ Task Force  
New Energy Economy  
Nuestra Tierra  
Occidental Arts and Ecology Center  
Peaceful Communities  
Poets Against Walls  
Progress Texas  
Promote Care & Prevent Harm  
Proyecto Azteca  
Pulga Los Portales  
Revolve Impact  
Rian Immigrant Center  
Rio Grande International Study Center  
Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network  
Rio Grande Valley No Border Wall Coalition  
Rise St.James  
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights  
San Antonio Bay Estuarine Waterkeeper  
San Antonio Region Justice For Our Neighbors

Save RGV  
Shelters for Hope  
Sierra Club  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team  
South Texas Human Rights Center  
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)  
Southern Border Communities Coalition  
Southwest Environmental Center  
SustainUS  
Tahirih Justice Center - Houston Office  
Texas Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism  
Texas Rising RGV  
The Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans  
The International Sonoran Desert Alliance  
The Post-landfill Action Network  
Tuell Consulting  
Turtle Island Restoration Network  
Únete956.org  
Union for Reform Judaism  
United We Dream  
URGE RGV  
Washington Defender Association  
Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network  
Washington Office on Latin America  
Webb County Heritage Foundation  
WildEarth Guardians  
Wildlands Network  
Witness at the Border  
Women Act Now!  
Workers Defense Project  
Worth Rises  
350 New Orleans