

Crews still hard at work on Trump's border wall, despite stay-home orders and pandemic

Construction continues on 197 miles of wall the president says will keep out drugs, migrants and disease. 'We've been told to show up every day, nonstop,' says one worker.



A construction worker (left) helps move a section of reinforcing grid into place while a trenching machine (right) digs a new footing and other construction workers assemble a 30-foot-high bollard style wall at a construction site south of Yuma, Ariz., near the border between the United States and Mexico.(Randy Hoeft / AP)

COLUMBUS, N.M. — Efforts are fully underway around the country to slow the spread of coronavirus, with Americans under stay-at-home orders, allowed out only for essential work.

But not everywhere.

Construction of President Donald Trump's massive border wall is continuing here

along a barren stretch of the border between Mexico and its namesake U.S. state to the north. And the work is being carried out with a sense of urgency.

A government contractor is building a “mancamp” to house as many as 80 workers. Groups of men are working side-by-side at a site near Columbus, erecting sections of barrier with no pretense about the White House’s social-distancing guidelines. And much of the traffic along New Mexico State Road 9 is wall-related: massive trucks ferrying steel, concrete, and other material to keep the project moving.

“I guess I should be grateful to have a job,” said trucker Juan Rosas, who leaves his home in El Paso each day to haul loads of steel bollards to the site. “But truth is, I’m nervous. Maybe it’s time we put the money into things like medical supplies, like face masks, ventilators. But we’ve been told to show up every day, nonstop because we have to get this wall built by the end of the year.”

A spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said the workforce is considered “essential” and incorrectly claimed that workers are following White House and CDC guidelines about safe distancing. At the White House, Trump has been unapologetic about wall construction continuing through the crisis.



With the pace of border wall construction lagging behind President Donald Trump's goal of completing 500 miles by year's end, new fencing is slowly replacing old barriers, with gaps in between, near Highway 9 near Columbus, N.M.(Alfredo Corchado / Staff Photo)

"The entire world is shut down," he marveled at a briefing on the pandemic earlier this week — even as he made clear that he doesn't intend to scale back the wall effort.

"The wall is up to about 160 miles already and ... any place where you have that wall, other than walking around the edges, it's stopping everybody cold," he said.

"As the wall gets bigger, that really helps us a lot" on drugs, unauthorized migration and, he claimed, contagion. "We'll have a tremendous impact on drugs. But one of the other things we'll also have an impact, we think, on the virus."

Public health experts dispute that. Mexico has only a fraction of the COVID-19 cases reported in the U.S., although testing is more limited south of the border.

Regardless, the virus is spreading fast on both sides.

“It’s unacceptable that any industry in any part of the state would be carrying on without taking into account the serious hazards posed by the ongoing public health emergency,” New Mexico’s governor, Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham, said in a statement.

New Mexico is one of 19 states that list construction as one of the “essential” activities exempt from stay-home restrictions. But what counts as “essential” is being interpreted in many different ways around the nation and the world.

On Thursday, Columbus Mayor Ezequiel Salas told *The Dallas Morning News* that the city is sending the company overseeing the mancamp and wall construction a letter asking them to delay the project for at least “two weeks, maybe longer” to comply with the CDC’s social-distancing policies.

That company, Galveston-based SLSCO, was awarded a \$789 million contract in 2019 for border replacement wall construction.



Construction of President Donald Trump’s border wall continues as workers defy safe-distancing guidelines set by the White House to halt the spread of

coronavirus. Here, clusters of workers toiled on April 1, 2020, just across the Texas border along Highway 9, between El Paso and Columbus, N.M.(Alfredo Corchado / Staff Photo)

The wall project is in the El Paso Border Patrol Sector, which includes all of New Mexico. An agency spokesman, Jay Field, wouldn't say how many people are working at the site but said no furloughs are planned. He added that any questions about the health of the workers, or medical personnel on-site, or whether workers have been tested for coronavirus, "should be referred to contractor/sub-contractor for response."

An SLSCO official at the site declined to comment and referred all questions to the Army Corps of Engineers.

At Trump's side during his Wednesday briefing, acting homeland security secretary Chad Wolf boasted that construction is still underway.

"We continue to build miles of the wall every day," he said. "We see a lot of benefits from the border wall system ... and we're still well on track to meet 400, 450 miles by the end of the calendar year."

For lawmakers and border advocates who opposed the project before the pandemic, the relentless construction — active work along about 197 miles, according to Customs and Border Protection — is appalling.

"This is unconscionable. We should use the billions of dollars for medical devices like ventilators, not to build a wall," said Kevin Bixby, director of the Southwest Environmental Center. "By continuing to build the wall, the government is continuing to spread the virus."

The Las Cruces, N.M.-based organization joined the Southern Border Communities Coalition, American Civil Liberties Union and Sierra Club in a lawsuit that seeks to halt construction by asking a court to find Trump's national emergency declaration an unconstitutional attempt to circumvent Congress.

While the wall is usually framed as an immigration issue, Bixby's wildlife group had focused on its impact on endangered species, including Mexican wolves and jaguars. Until now.

“We don’t need a wall, much less in a time of federal emergency,” Bixby said. “All the workers are engaging in a high-risk activity. Patronizing restaurants. Putting residents at risk, and their families. These workers come from all over the country,” making them likely vectors for infection if COVID-19 emerges in the workforce.

But jobs are increasingly scarce, and workers are willing to take the risk.

“I’m just glad to have a job, thanks to the wall. It’s a job,” said a trucker who identified himself only as Guillermo, also hauling a load of steel bollards near Columbus.

4 new miles of barrier so far

According to CBP, 147 miles of barrier have been installed since Trump took office in January 2017. Nearly all of that has been to replace lower, less sturdy fencing.

Just 2 miles of barrier have been installed where none previously existed. Another 2 miles involve secondary fencing where only one fence had stood.

The cost so far has been \$15 billion, although Congress authorized just \$5.1 billion of that.

The White House cobbled together most of the rest by diverting funds intended for the Pentagon in 2019 — including \$6.3 billion for counternarcotics efforts, and \$3.6 billion earmarked for military construction projects such as housing and schools for military families, a training facility for drone pilots and a warehouse for hazardous material.

In 2020, the administration plans to shift \$3.5 billion to the border wall from military counterdrug programs and \$3.7 billion from the military construction budget, according to congressional aides and news reports.

On March 27, House Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson and Rep. Kathleen Rice, D-N.Y., chair of the subcommittee on border security, wrote to Wolf, Attorney General William Barr and the general in charge of the Army Corps of Engineers urging immediate suspension of wall construction.

“Contrary to the President’s own recommendations to reduce person-to-person contact, your agencies are continuing to direct border wall contractors, surveyors, appraisers, cultural and historical assessors, and other non-essential employees to leave their homes to work on the President’s border wall project,” they wrote.

Trump has all but abandoned his campaign promise to force Mexico to pay for the wall he envisioned.



Construction work is so plentiful that SLSCO Ltd., a government contractor, is building a mancamp for at least 80 workers in the historic district of Columbus, N.M. (Alfredo Corchado / Staff Photo)

And the project has hit legal obstacles, especially in Texas, where much of the land along the Rio Grande is privately owned. Many landowners have refused to sell, and the Department of Homeland Security has deployed lawyers to pursue eminent domain cases.

Democratic lawmakers have demanded a halt to that activity, too, during the outbreak.

‘Putting families at risk’

In the midst of the Great Depression in 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration to put millions of idled Americans to work building roads and other public infrastructure. Border wall construction has been under way for most of Trump’s three years in office.

But in an era of mass unemployment — 10 million jobless claims in just the past two weeks — it’s a visible sign of Washington’s ability to provide paychecks when the private sector cannot, even if the exact number of jobs tied to the wall project isn’t clear because the federal government isn’t forthcoming with details.

Democratic members of the House Armed Services Committee sent a letter Thursday to Defense Secretary Mark Esper, demanding a halt to wall construction and adherence to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “clear guidance on social distancing and other precautions ... to blunt coronavirus impacts.”

The letter noted that Esper had already curtailed troop movements and suspended training exercises, and asked him to show “appropriate restraint” by “halting non-essential projects, such as construction of the border wall, that put personnel and communities at risk.”

“President Trump is putting families at risk. He’s putting workers at risk. He’s putting businesses at risk. He’s adding insult to injury to our community,” said Rep. Veronica Escobar, D-El Paso, one of the lawmakers who signed that letter. “On top of every threat that this poses, it’s a symbol of this president’s narcissism.”

Last week, Congress sent Trump a \$2.2 trillion recovery package that boosted jobless benefits, helped airlines and other businesses, and provided vast sums for medical equipment and emergency response.

The package includes over \$10 billion for the Pentagon to use for pandemic response — with an explicit prohibition barring any of the funds to be shifted to

wall construction.

Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, had a hand in that provision.

“Rather than fund an ineffective border wall ... we must put all our resources into rapid response against this pandemic,” said Cuellar, vice-chair of the homeland security subcommittee on appropriations, which controls billions in spending for border security.

Double standards

The unrestrained construction efforts reflect double standards in the pandemic era.

Four states hit hard by the outbreak have banned construction. A half-dozen states have no restrictions.

In El Paso, about 80 miles away, Mayor Dee Margo announced measures Wednesday to slow the virus. Construction can continue, with limits. Distancing is required. Shifts must be staggered. Workers are prohibited from gathering for meals or breaks.

The rules require access to hand sanitizer and soap. Workers must remove gloves before meals and restroom breaks if they’ve shared tools. Employers can’t retaliate against workers who need to be quarantined because of potential exposure.



Pancho Villa rode at the head of his rebel army in Mexico in 1916. American soldiers pursued Villa into Mexico after the raid on Columbus, N.M., but he eluded capture. He was assassinated by political enemies in Mexico in 1923.(Anonymous / ASSOCIATED PRESS)

In Columbus, Salas, the mayor, described his village of about 3,000 as an “industry city” because of the wall-related economic boom. Salas said Columbus signed the contract with SLSCO about 30 days ago.

The company “assured us that they are going to take all kinds of precautions to ensure everyone’s safety. They’re human beings, too,” he said, defending SLS. “They’re not here to contaminate and kill people off.”

He said some of the workers are natives of Columbus, men with families in the town.

At the Borderland Café in Columbus, takeout orders have increased in recent days as wall construction gets closer to town.

“We are running out of equipment in hospitals and that money can be used for that,” said owner Adriana Zizumbo. “Businesswise, I feel good [about the mancamp] and I will be able to feed them good food and stuff, but right now with the coronavirus it doesn’t make sense that they will be in one unit together.”

Columbus is known for the epic March 9, 1916, raid by Pancho Villa’s Division of the North, which escalated into a full-scale battle between Villistas and the U.S. Army. Locals have since used the raid as a teaching lesson for cooperation, working as one community. They’re proud of their connection to Palomas, Chihuahua, across the border. Many revile the wall, which they view as an ugly scar.

Cindy Varnhugen, municipal clerk, shrugged aside concerns about the workers’ temporary housing going up in the middle of the town’s historic district. “I don’t see any health concerns,” she said, pointing to the camp where workers were putting their last touches. “The men will be isolated there.”

Laura Gomez, a civic leader who helps organize the annual Cabalgata Binacional parade to promote friendship between two countries, said, “I presume they have a clean bill of health to be working out there in groups. I’m more concerned about how ugly the camp looks.”

She said Columbus and Palomas have been careful about the virus, especially on the Mexican side. Travelers into Mexico are greeted by health officials who check their temperatures and ask about health concerns.

Still, she said, “What does this say about America, about our president? It’s all about the money. Even in coronavirus, the wall keeps going up, the chili and onion pickers will pick the fields. That’s America.”



Truckers lined up near the wall construction site April 1 near Columbus, N.M. Truckers and other workers expressed mixed feelings about wall construction amid the coronavirus pandemic.(Alfredo Corchado / Staff Photo)

Back with his truck, behind him, the ubiquitous presence of Border Patrol vehicles, Rosas, the El Pasoan, made ready for his next haul. He reflected on why Trump might be so insistent about continuing work on the wall while most of the country stays home to blunt the wildfire spread of the virus.

"I don't know," he said. "Obsession, maybe?"

Border correspondent Alfredo Corchado reported from New Mexico and El Paso. Washington Bureau Chief Todd J. Gillman reported from Washington.

04.01.20 Letter to Sec Esper Re Accelerated Wall Construction During COVID-19 by The Dallas Morning News on Scribd (click on the link to see letter).

Source:

<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2020/04/02/crews-still-hard-at-work-on-trumps-border-wall-despite-stay-home-orders-and-coronavirus-pandemic/>

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