

CRS Report for Congress

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Border Security: Fences Along the U.S. International Border

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Summary

This report outlines the issues involved with the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS's) completion of a three-tiered, 14-mile fence, along the border near San Diego, California. The state of California has delayed completion of the fence due primarily to legal and policy conflicts with its federally-approved, state-run Coastal Management Program. Current authorization for the fence only allows the waiver of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. During the 108th Congress, a variety of proposals were introduced that would have allowed the department to waive a number of other environmental, conservation, and cultural laws and requirements to varying degrees. Similar proposals are likely to surface again during the 109th Congress. This report will be updated as warranted.

Background

The United States Border Patrol (USBP) incorporated the construction of physical barriers directly on the border into their National Strategic Plan in the early 1990s as part of its "Prevention Through Deterrence" strategy,¹ which called for reducing unauthorized migration by placing agents and resources directly on the border along population centers.² The USBP first constructed border fencing in the San Diego sector, which

¹ For an expanded discussion of the USBP, please refer to CRS Report RL32562, *Border Security: The Role of the U.S. Border Patrol*, by Blas Nuñez-Neto.

² Until recently the USBP formed part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296) merged most interior and border enforcement functions of the Department of Agriculture, the INS, and the U.S. Customs Service to form the
(continued...)

extends inland from the Pacific Ocean along the international land border with Mexico, and covers approximately 7,000 square miles of territory. Located north of Tijuana and Tecate, Mexican cities with a combined population of 2 million people, the sector features no natural barriers to entry by unauthorized migrants and smugglers.³ Using the broad powers granted to the Attorney General (AG) to control and guard the U.S. border,⁴ in 1990 the USBP began erecting a physical barrier to deter illegal entries and drug smuggling in the San Diego sector. The ensuing “primary” fence was completed in 1993 and covered the first 14 miles of the border, starting from the Pacific Ocean, and was constructed of 10-foot-high welded steel.⁵ This fence (and the subsequent three-tiered fence, see discussion below) was constructed with the assistance of the Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) Army Corps of Engineers. Since 1990, Congress has included language in DOD appropriations bills allowing the DOD to assist federal agencies in counter-drug activities, including the construction of fencing and roads to reduce the flow of narcotics into the country.⁶ In 2001, this power was re-authorized by Congress through FY2006.⁷

According to CBP, the primary fence, in combination with various labor intensive USBP enforcement initiatives along San Diego border region (i.e., Operation Gatekeeper), proved to be quite successful but fiscally and environmentally costly.⁸ For example, as undocumented aliens and smugglers breached the primary fence and attempted to evade detection, USBP agents were often forced to pursue the suspects through environmentally sensitive areas. It soon became apparent to immigration officials and lawmakers that the USBP needed, among other things, a “rigid” enforcement system that could integrate infrastructure (i.e., a multi-tiered fence and roads), manpower, and new technologies to further control the border region. The concept of a three-tiered fence system was first recommended by a 1993 Sandia Laboratories study commissioned by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The study concluded that aliens attempting to enter the United States from Mexico had shown remarkable resiliency in bypassing or destroying

² (...continued)

Directorate of Border and Transportation Security (BTS) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Using the authority given by Congress in the Homeland Security Act, the Administration sub-divided BTS and placed the border enforcement functions, including the USBP, within the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, *Operation Gatekeeper: An Investigation Into Allegations of Fraud and Misconduct*, July 1998.

⁴ Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. §1103 (a)(5).

⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Border Control — Revised Strategy is Showing Some Positive Results*, GAO/GGD-95-30, Jan. 31, 1995.

⁶ See P.L. 101-510, Div. A, Title X, §1004; P.L. 102-190, Div A, Title X, Part G, §1088; P.L. 102-484, Div A, Title X, Subtitle E, §1041(a)-(d)(1); P.L. 103-160, Div A, Title XI, Subtitle C, §1121(a), (b); P.L. 103-337, Div A, Title X, Subtitle B, §1011(a).

⁷ P.L. 107-107, Title X, Subtit. C, §1021 (amending §1004 of the National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 1991, P.L. 101-510, codified at 10 U.S.C. §374 nt.).

⁸ See California Coastal Commission, *W 13a Staff Report and Recommendation on Consistency Determination*, CD-063-03, Oct. 2003, at 14-16 (stating that construction of the primary fence significantly assisted the USBP’s efforts in deterring smuggling attempts via drive-throughs using automobiles and motorcycles). (Hereafter CCC Staff Report.)

obstacles in their path, and postulated that “[a] three-fence barrier system with vehicle patrol roads between the fences and lights will provide the necessary discouragement.”⁹ Congress responded to these enforcement needs, in part, with the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996.¹⁰ This comprehensive law, among other things, expanded the existing fence by authorizing the INS to construct a triple-layered fence along the same 14 miles of the US-Mexico border near San Diego.

Section 102 of IIRIRA — Improvement of Barriers at the Border

Section 102 of IIRIRA concerns the improvement and construction of barriers at our international borders. Section 102(a) appears to give the AG¹¹ broad authority to install additional physical barriers and roads “in the vicinity of the United States border to deter illegal crossings in areas of high illegal entry into the United States.” The phrase *vicinity of the United States border* is not defined in the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. §1101 *et seq.*) or in immigration regulations. The section also does not stipulate what specific characteristics would designate an area as one of *high illegal entry*.

Section 102(b) mandates that the AG construct a barrier in the border area near San Diego. Specifically, §102(b) directs the AG to construct a three-tiered barrier along the 14 miles of the international land border of the United States, starting at the Pacific Ocean and extending eastward. Section 102(b) ensures that the AG will build a barrier, pursuant to his broader authority in §102(a), near the San Diego area, although there is some debate whether IIRIRA requires *continuous* triple fencing and roads for the entire 14-mile corridor.¹² Section 102(b) also provides authority for the acquisition of necessary easements, requires certain safety features be incorporated into the design of the fence, and authorizes an appropriation not to exceed \$12 million.

Section 102(c) waives the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 (16 U.S.C. §§1531 *et seq.*) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 U.S.C. §§4321 *et seq.*), to the extent the AG determines necessary, in order to ensure expeditious construction of the barriers authorized to be constructed under §102. The waiver authority in this provision appears to apply both to barriers that may be constructed *in the vicinity of the border* and to the barrier that is to be constructed near the San Diego area. Reportedly, the waiver provisions established in this section have not been implemented by the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP).¹³ In fact, CBP reportedly published

⁹ Peter Andreas, “The Escalation of U.S. Immigration Control in the Post-NAFTA Era,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 113, no. 4, winter 1998-1999, p. 595.

¹⁰ See P.L. 104-208, Div. C. IIRIRA was passed as part of the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act of 1997.

¹¹ Although the law still cites to the Attorney General, the authorities granted by this section now appear to rest with the Secretary of DHS. See The Homeland Security Act of 2002, P.L. 104-208, §§102(a), 441, 1512(d) and 1517 (references to the Attorney General or Commissioner in statute and regulations are deemed to refer to the Secretary).

¹² See CCC, *Staff Report*, at 7 nt. 2 and p. 23 nt. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.* at 14.

a Final Environmental Impact Study pursuant to NEPA and received a non-jeopardy Biological Opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the ESA.¹⁴

Section 102(d) also provides the AG with various land acquisition authority. In 2002, Congress amended the *U.S. Code* to authorize the AG to use INS funds to purchase land for enforcement fences and to construct the fences.¹⁵

Recent Developments

Of the 14 miles authorized to be constructed, nine miles of the triple-fence have been completed. Two sections, including the final three-mile stretch of fence that leads to the Pacific Ocean, have not been finished. In order to finish the fence, the USBP proposed to fill a deep canyon known as “Smuggler’s Gulch” with over 2 million cubic yards of dirt. The triple-fence would then be extended across the filled gulch. California’s Coastal Commission (CCC), however, objected to and essentially halted the completion of the fence in February 2004, because it determined that the CBP had not demonstrated, among other things, that the project was consistent “to the maximum extent practicable” with the policies of the California Coastal Management Program — a state program approved under the federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) (16 U.S.C. §§1451-1464).¹⁶ The CZMA requires federal agency activity within or outside the coastal zone that affects any land or water use or natural resource of the coastal zone to be carried out in a manner that is consistent to the maximum extent practicable with the policies of an approved state management program.¹⁷ If a federal court finds a federal activity to be inconsistent with an approved state program and the Secretary determines that compliance is unlikely to be achieved through mediation, the President may exempt from compliance the activity if the President determines that the activity is in the “paramount interest of the United States.”¹⁸

According to the commission, the CBP did not believe that it could make further environmental concessions and still comply with IIRIRA. The CCC held that Congress did not specify a particular design in the IIRIRA, and that the CBP failed to present a convincing argument that the less environmentally damaging alternative projects it rejected would have prevented compliance with the IIRIRA. Specifically, the CCC was concerned with the potential for significant adverse effects on (1) the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research and Reserve; (2) state and federally listed threatened and endangered species; (3) lands set aside for protection within California’s Multiple Species Conservation Program; and (4) other aspects of the environment.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ P.L.107-273, §201(a).

¹⁶ See CCC, *Staff Report*, at 5-7. After California’s Coastal Management Plan was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration pursuant to the CZMA in 1977, apparently all federal activities affecting coastal zone resources in California became subject to the CCC’s regulatory purview.

¹⁷ 16 U.S.C. §1456(c).

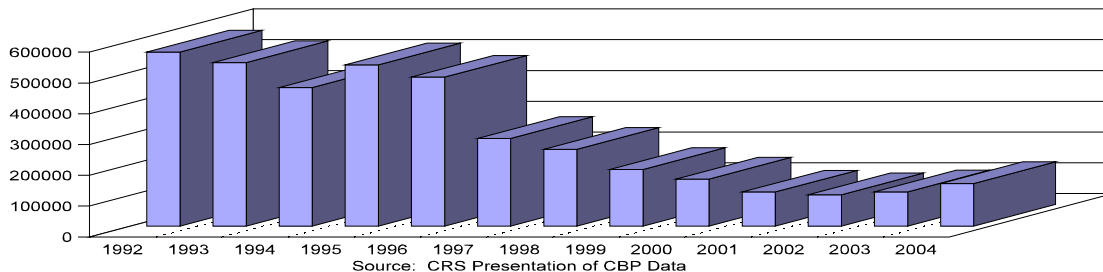
¹⁸ 16 U.S.C. §1456(c)(1)(B).

Again, while the IIRIRA allowed DHS to waive two major environmental laws, it did not include the CZMA in its purview. By contrast, the final version of the House passed intelligence bill in the 108th Congress, S. 2845 EAH, contained language which would have added the CZMA, among a wide array of other environmental, conservation, and cultural restrictions, to the list of regulations that DHS could waive in its construction of border barriers.¹⁹ This section was removed during the Conference process. Other proposals were also reportedly being discussed that would have allowed DHS to waive *all laws* necessary to ensure expeditious construction of the security barriers.²⁰ The 109th Congress may again face the border fence construction issue, possibly considering language that would allow the Secretary to waive *all laws* the Secretary determines necessary to expedite the construction of barriers and roads.

San Diego Sector Apprehensions

Apprehension statistics have long been used as a performance measure by the USBP. However, the number of apprehensions may be a misleading statistic for several reasons, including the data's focus on events rather than people²¹ and the absence of reliable estimates for how many aliens successfully evade capture. This makes it difficult to establish a firm correlation between the number of apprehensions in a given sector and the number of people attempting to enter through that sector. These factors aside, however, apprehensions data remain the best way to gain a glimpse into the reality facing USBP agents. As **Figure 1** shows, apprehensions remained stable during the early 1990s in the San Diego sector despite the construction of the "primary" fence in 1993.

Figure 1: USBP Apprehensions, San Diego Sector, FY1992-2004



After the IIRIRA's mandate for increased enforcement along the Southwest border in 1996, including construction of the triple-fence, apprehensions dropped rapidly in the San Diego sector in the late 1990s — from 480,000 in FY1996 to 100,000 in FY2002. While some of this reduction may have been due to the construction of the triple-fence, the number of agents assigned to the San Diego sector also increased significantly over

¹⁹ S. 2845 EAH, §3131.

²⁰ Ben Geman, "Enviro Exemptions for Security Fence at Issue in September 11 Conference," *Environment and Energy Daily*, Nov. 17, 2004.

²¹ If the same person is apprehended multiple times attempting to enter the country in one year, each apprehension will be counted separately by the USBP in generating their apprehension statistics. This means that apprehension statistics may overstate the number of aliens apprehended each year.

this period — from 980 agents in 1993 to 2,274 in 1998.²² Additionally, the number of underground sensors deployed in the San Diego sector almost tripled from 1993 to 1998, and the fleet of vehicles increased by over 150% over the same period.²³

The increase in manpower and resources reflected the USBP's policy of re-routing unauthorized migration away from population centers to remote border regions where their agents have a tactical advantage over border-crossers. Other sectors, especially the remote Tucson sector in Arizona, saw apprehensions increase significantly in the late 1990s. Proponents of border fences point to the drastic reduction in apprehensions along the San Diego sector as tangible proof that these fences succeed in their goal of reducing cross-border smuggling and migration where they are constructed. Opponents attribute part of the decrease in apprehensions to the increase in manpower and resources in the sector and (pointing to the increase in apprehensions in less-populated sectors) contend that the fence only succeeds in re-routing unauthorized migration. Additionally, some believe the reduction in apprehensions can be attributed to the economic recession in the United States which depressed the job market, while others note that the reduction began in the late 1990's when the economy was still undergoing a period of robust growth.

Policy Issues

The completion of the border fence is likely to be an issue faced by the 109th Congress. At issue, is the balance between the preservation of the environment in border regions and the requirements of domestic security. On the one hand are environmental interests who believe that the environmental damage caused by the border fencing is not justified because the fencing merely shifts unauthorized migration and therefore does not contribute significantly to national security. Others are concerned with the potential precedent that could be set with giving the Secretary very broad waiver authority. On the other hand are those who believe that the border fences have been an effective tool in discouraging aliens from crossing the border in those areas where they have been constructed, and that the environmental damage caused by their construction is an unfortunate but necessary reality of securing the border.

If the 109th Congress should take legislative action on the border fence, possible policy alternatives may include

- allowing DHS to waive some or all applicable laws in order to expedite the construction of all fences along our international borders;
- allowing DHS to waive some or all applicable laws only to finish the construction of the 14-mile triple-fence in San Diego;
- establishing a panel of experts to review all proposed border fence construction projects; and
- requiring DHS to propose alternative construction plans that would mitigate the environmental impact of the fence's construction.

²² CBP data provided to CRS on Jan. 12, 2004.

²³ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "*Operation Gatekeeper Fact Sheet*," available at [<http://uscis.gov/graphics/publicaffairs/factsheets/opgatefs.htm>], last visited Jan. 11, 2004.