

Our Concerns about Mexico Border Fencing in the Rio Grande Valley

The Rio Grande poses a conservation challenge that is unique to Texas among the border states. Stretching along the entire 1,250-mile boundary between Texas and Mexico, the river is a critical source of water for people and wildlife. In the Rio Grande Valley, the lushly vegetated river banks provide an irreplaceable wildlife corridor that resident and migratory animals and birds depend upon.

For this reason, The Nature Conservancy of Texas cannot support the proposed construction along the Rio Grande of a border barrier and high-speed roadway of the scale that has been described in preliminary reports. While we share public concerns about border security and illegal immigration, the construction of such a structure and the clearing of vegetation along the river would destroy critical habitat for wildlife.

We are especially concerned about reports that the starting point for such a fence may be the national wildlife refuges in the Rio Grande Valley that represent more than 90,000 acres of the border's most successful habitat-restoration projects and now are home to a long list of species that depend on the Valley's river corridors to survive. The Nature Conservancy of Texas assisted in assembling this complex of wildlife refuge properties, a Herculean effort shared among many partners that has taken nearly three decades and cost taxpayers upwards of \$100 million.

The spectacular diversity of wildlife in the Valley has led to recognition of the area as a major ecotourism destination and is a fundamental economic component, contributing \$125 million a year to the local economy from nature tourism. Yet, land clearing in the Valley over time has resulted in the loss of more than 95 percent of the wildlife habitat. The wildlife that people travel from far and wide to see depends on vegetated migratory corridors on both sides of the river. Conserving what remains is essential to the survival of countless animal and plant species, as well as to the economy and quality of life of much of South Texas.

The Conservancy also protects more than 1,000 acres at our own nature preserve, where we have nearly two miles of frontage along the Rio Grande. The Lennox Foundation Southmost Preserve is home to one of the only two remaining large stands of native sabal palms in the United States. The other site where this rare palm forest is conserved is nearby at Audubon's Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary, also along the river. At both of these non-profit nature preserves, the land and the water also provide habitat for ocelots, indigo snakes, Texas tortoises and an amazing array of birds. The erection of a border fence in these locations would damage habitat for an array of animals and plants unique to this part of the United States, and also could prevent wildlife from accessing protected habitat north of the border region.

We believe that other measures – such as vehicle barriers, modern remote-surveillance technology and expanded staffing for the Border Patrol – should be explored before undertaking the construction of a physical barrier. These and other available options could minimize the impact on wildlife and

preserve what little habitat remains along the Rio Grande. With careful planning and site evaluation, the United States can protect its borders *and* protect the remaining natural resources on Texas' and Mexico's common river.

The Nature Conservancy has been working for decades with partners in both Texas and Mexico to conserve the rare and precious natural resources we share. Together, we have conducted extensive studies of the region's biological diversity. We hope the destruction of critical wildlife corridors that would result from this proposed border fence is being considered with appropriate gravity. We believe that a collaborative dialogue among the various public and private interests can result in solutions that help conserve wildlife and meet our needs for border security

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