

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105443](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

To help address illegal cross-border activity, the federal government has constructed hundreds of miles of physical barriers along the southwest border. This included federal lands managed by Interior where important cultural and natural resources are located. DHS and DOD used legal authorities to waive various cultural and natural resource-related laws in constructing border barriers from January 2017 through January 2021. A presidential proclamation paused construction in January 2021.

GAO was asked to review border barrier impacts to cultural and natural resources. This report reviews (1) border barrier construction from January 2017 through January 2021 and associated impacts, (2) actions taken since January 2021 to address impacts, and (3) CBP and DOD assessments of potential impacts from construction conducted from 2017 to 2021. GAO analyzed CBP data and reviewed CBP and DOD assessments and plans. GAO also interviewed officials from federal agencies, Tribes, and stakeholders selected because of their proximity to, or expertise with, resource protection along the border.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that CBP and Interior document a joint strategy to mitigate resource impacts from barrier construction and that CBP evaluate lessons learned from its assessments of potential cultural and natural resource impacts. The agencies agreed with these recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105443](#). For more information, contact Anna Maria Ortiz at (202) 512-3841 or ortiza@gao.gov or Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov.

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SOUTHWEST BORDER

Additional Actions Needed to Address Cultural and Natural Resource Impacts from Barrier Construction

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Department of Defense (DOD) installed about 458 miles of border barrier panels across the southwest border from January 2017 through January 2021. Most (81 percent) of the miles of panels replaced existing barriers. The agencies installed over 62 percent of barrier miles on federal lands, including on those managed by the Department of the Interior. Interior and CBP officials, as well as federally recognized Tribes and stakeholders, noted that the barriers led to various impacts, including to cultural resources, water sources, and endangered species, and from erosion.

Examples of Natural Resource Impacts from Barrier Construction (May 2022)



Erosion below the site of a cleared construction staging area (left); erosion below an area where only several border barrier panels were installed as of January 2021 (right).

Source: GAO. | [GAO-23-105443](#)

Since the administration paused border barrier construction in January 2021, CBP has prioritized efforts to address safety hazards left at incomplete project sites, such as removing exposed rebar. In addition, CBP and Interior have worked together to identify actions to mitigate the impacts on federal lands. As the agencies are both involved in addressing these impacts, they could benefit from clearly defining their roles and responsibilities for doing so and jointly identifying the costs and time frames to complete all of the identified mitigation actions, consistent with collaboration leading practices. Documenting a joint strategy that includes these inputs could help CBP and Interior better ensure that key resource impacts of border barrier construction are mitigated and that decision makers have the information needed to allocate resources.

Before proceeding with barrier construction from 2017 to 2021, CBP took steps to assess the potential impacts of such construction, while relying on waivers of cultural and natural resource-related laws to expedite construction. For example, CBP solicited input from land management agencies, Tribes, and the public. Interior and tribal officials and stakeholders told GAO that CBP's information was not sufficiently detailed to facilitate meaningful input. They provided suggestions to GAO for improving CBP's assessments. CBP has not evaluated lessons learned from its assessments. Doing so could help the agency better identify potential impacts of any future projects.