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DHS TO WAIVE RULES TO SPEED REBUILDING OF SAN DIEGO BORDER WALL

Environmental groups criticize move, saying it would endanger sensitive wildlife areas

By Jim Carlton
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SAN DIEGO – The Trump administration said Tuesday it would waive certain federal regulations to expedite rebuilding of an existing border wall along this city’s boundary with Mexico, in a move that environmental groups said would further endanger sensitive wildlife areas.

The waiver by the Department of Homeland Security applies to work including construction of additional barriers and roads along a 15-mile stretch of rugged hills beginning at the Pacific Ocean, where extensive fencing – three layers deep in places – are currently in place to separate the twin metropolises of San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico.

“The (San Diego border control) sector remains an area of high illegal entry for which there is an immediate need to improve current infrastructure and construct additional border barriers and roads,” Homeland Security officials said in a statement.

The waiver, authorized by Congress in 2005, has been used five previous times – most recently in 2008 – to give the department the authority to fortify a border that critics say has been a porous entry for illegal immigration and drug smuggling into the U.S.

Towering metal fences and barricades installed before 2008 have contributed to erosion problems in sensitive wetland areas, said David Shirk, a professor of political science and international relations at the University of San Diego.

Officials at the Center for Biological Diversity said the work to rebuild the San Diego barriers – part of President Donald Trump’s promised wall along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border – would harm critical habitat for numerous endangered species, including the Quino checkerspot butterfly and coastal California gnatcatcher.

“This isn’t just a wall they’re in a rush to build. It’s roads, lighting and all of the infrastructure that comes with it,” Brian Segee, an attorney for the Tucson, Ariz.-based environmental group, said in a statement. “All of this without any environmental review or public input. It’s a travesty and it has to be stopped. We believe the waiver is unconstitutional, and we’re confident the courts will agree.”

Agency officials, however, said they remain committed to environmental stewardship with the wall projects.

“DHS has been coordinating and consulting – and intends to continue doing so – with other federal and state resource agencies to ensure impacts to the environment, wildlife, and cultural and historic artifacts are analyzed and minimized, to the extent possible,” the department said in its statement.