March 26, 2020

William Barr
Attorney General
Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C., 20530

Dr. Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C., 20301

Chad Wolf
Acting Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20528

RE: An immediate halt to all border wall construction to save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Attorney General Barr, Secretary Esper, and Acting Secretary Wolf,

While communities across the world are fighting the COVID-19 pandemic unlike anything in recent history, your agencies are continuing to divert life-saving resources to further border wall construction. The organizations that co-sign this letter demand that you recognize the life-threatening risks of continuing border wall construction during this crisis and order your Departments to halt it immediately.

Shortly after President Trump declared the coronavirus a national emergency, his administration also announced plans to continue construction in every border state, with 150 miles slated for California, New Mexico, and Arizona and 15 active sites in Texas.¹ Your actions risk government agents and contractors spreading the coronavirus in Southern border communities, place undue strain on border communities whose main focus is survival, and strip away precious resources from the federal government that should be used to respond to the crisis and ensure that communities are prepared to stop the spread of the virus.

As of the drafting of this letter, news outlets have reported at least 53,000 cases of COVID-19 across the country, including over 700 fatalities. Well over 3,000 cases of COVID-19 are in southern border states and there are certainly more to come. In counties where border wall construction is ongoing, local governments have issued emergency declarations, in accordance with guidance from federal and state public health authorities, banning gatherings of ten or more individuals. All of California is now under statewide orders to “shelter in place” at home.

Despite this unprecedented public health emergency, across the U.S. border government contractors continue to drop into local communities, erect barriers, and demand to enter and survey private property, including people’s homes. It is unconscionable that during a pandemic, where death rates for some demographics rise as high as 27%, construction crews and government agents continue to gather, enter local communities and engage in a business-as-usual mindset. In the border communities we represent, your agencies’ actions are quite literally endangering the lives of border residents.

In addition to the risk government agents bring to border communities, the border wall also forces border residents to deal with eminent domain proceedings during a global crisis. In Texas, most of the land in the path of the border wall is privately owned. How can border residents meaningfully and thoughtfully engage in eminent domain processes in these times of crisis? Yet in recent days the government has filed 3 more motions for takings in South Texas. Residents, especially the elderly, Indigenous tribes, and relatively isolated border communities should not be put in the untenable position of having to stay at home to protect their health while at the same time having to deal with the stress of negotiating land takings for border wall construction.

As of January 2020 the administration amassed over $10 billion in border wall funding from Defense diversions and in recent months has threatened another $3.6 billion dollars in diversions for construction. To place these numbers into context, Congress recently allocated $8 billion for the initial emergency response to the COVID-19’s outbreak in the U.S. For your agencies to continue using vital resources, in a moment where entire industries are reworking their factories just to build masks and ventilators, is beyond the pale. Instead of constructing barriers, the Army Corps of Engineers should use its limited resources to fight the pandemic. Untold lives could be saved if the resources currently used on construction could instead be used for hospitals, clinics, respirators, masks, everything needed to keep our country safe. While millions of everyday people are working to fight a real national emergency, we demand your agencies prioritize their safety in this time.

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4 https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6912e2.htm?s_cid=mm6912e2_w
6 https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/06/812964894/where-that-8-3-billion-in-u-s-coronavirus-funding-will-and-wont-go
While we disagree on the usefulness of the border wall as a matter of policy, we trust that we agree that the pandemic currently enveloping our country and the world requires an all-hands-on-deck response. Today we are asking your Departments to consider their positions in this time of crisis. For the safety of border residents and countless others, we demand you cease all aspects of border wall construction — from legal filings to breaking ground — immediately. The risk COVID-19 presents to our communities, our families, our lives, is simply too great to be ignored for the sake of continuing border wall construction.

Sincerely,

Texas Civil Rights Project
Al Otro Lado
Alliance San Diego
America’s Voice
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Beyond Plastics
Boise Chapter of Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Border Crit Institute
Borderlands Restoration Network
Carnalismo National Brown Berets
Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Central Area Chamber Commerce
Chispa LCV
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)
Coalition on Human Needs
Coastal Bend Sierra Club
Community Visions
Cuenca Los Ojos
Defenders of Wildlife
Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries
Don't Separate Families
Earthworks
Ecotopia
Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement
FracTracker Alliance
FreshWater Accountability Project
Friends of The Wildlife Corridor/ Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge
Frontera Audubon Society
Frontera de Cristo
Frontera Water Protection Alliance
Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)
Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Greater Ajo Community Bill of Rights
GreenLatinos
Greenpeace
Hope Border Institute
Indivisible
Inland Ocean Coalition
Jewish Voice for Peace
Justice in Motion
Kitsap Immigrant Assistance Center
La Union Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)
Laredo Carnalismo Brown Berets
Laredo Film Society
Laredo Immigrant Alliance
Latin America Working Group
Latino Community Fund of WA State
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
League of Conservation Voters
Louisiana Bucket Brigade
LUCHA UTRGV
Madrean Archipelago Wildlife Center
Make the Road NY
Mano Amiga
MOVE Texas
National Immigration Law Center
National LGBTQ Task Force
New Energy Economy
Nuestra Tierra
Occidental Arts and Ecology Center
Peaceful Communities
Poets Against Walls
Progress Texas
Promote Care & Prevent Harm
Proyecto Azteca
Pulga Los Portales
Revolve Impact
Rian Immigrant Center
Rio Grande International Study Center
Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network
Rio Grande Valley No Border Wall Coalition
Rise St.James
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
San Antonio Bay Estuarine Waterkeeper
San Antonio Region Justice For Our Neighbors
Save RGV
Shelters for Hope
Sierra Club
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
South Texas Human Rights Center
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)
Southern Border Communities Coalition
Southwest Environmental Center
SustainUS
Tahirih Justice Center - Houston Office
Texas Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
Texas Rising RGV
The Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans
The International Sonoran Desert Alliance
The Post-landfill Action Network
Tuell Consulting
Turtle Island Restoration Network
Únete956.org
Union for Reform Judaism
United We Dream
URGE RGV
Washington Defender Association
Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network
Washington Office on Latin America
Webb County Heritage Foundation
WildEarth Guardians
Wildlands Network
Witness at the Border
Women Act Now!
Workers Defense Project
Worth Rises
350 New Orleans