

April 9, 2008

Dear Representative:

As people of faith and stewards of God's great earth, we write with grave concern over the environmental destruction currently occurring in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Nearly one-third of U.S. land along this border lies in public hands, including national wildlife refuges, national parks, and national forests. Large swathes of pristine land provide habitat for an abundance of plant and animal life, including many species that are found nowhere else in the U.S. The governments of the U.S. and Mexico have worked together for years to protect this fragile border ecosystem. Now, hasty construction of hundreds of miles of fencing along the border is destroying decades of cooperation and preservation.

A provision in the REAL ID Act, which was intended to expedite construction of a small section of the border fence in San Diego, is now being applied more broadly by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to circumvent U.S. law in order to construct long sections of the fence in other areas. **On April 1, 2008, DHS announced that they were imposing a blanket waiver of environmental and land management laws along the U.S.-Mexico border, giving DHS permission to ignore 35 laws** in order to complete construction of 470 miles of border fence by the end of 2008. The laws to be waived include the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Such laws are designed not only to protect wildlife and natural habitats, but to protect human health as well. It is a dangerous, disturbing precedent to allow one government agency to completely dismiss laws passed by Congress.

The current path of the border fence cuts through places like Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, home to over 500 species of plants, 50 species of mammals, and nearly 300 species of birds. Construction of the fence is severing migration routes and destroying thousands of acres of wildlife habitat. In Arizona alone, 39 species protected or proposed to be protected under the Endangered Species Act are being adversely affected by Border Patrol activities, including construction of the fence.

Opposition to construction of the border fence comes not only from those interested in protecting the environment, but also from private property owners, business owners, and local governments. All four border state governors have spoken out against the fence, citing not only a concern for nature, property rights, wasteful spending, and economic interests, but also expressing serious doubts that the border fence will improve security: "Now, strategic fencing in certain urban areas to direct the flow of traffic does make sense, but building a wall on the entire border is a preposterous idea... The only thing a wall would possibly accomplish is to help the ladder business." (Texas Governor Rick Perry¹)

We urge you to cosponsor H.R. 2593, the Borderlands Conservation and Security Act of 2007. This legislation would:

1. Require compliance with laws meant to protect the air, water, wildlife, culture, and the health and safety of people in borderland communities.
2. Give land management agencies, Native American tribes, and local communities a voice in border fence construction and decision-making.
3. Give experts at DHS the flexibility to decide whether fences, vehicle barriers, or virtual fences would be most effective in securing the border.
4. Provide resources to help mitigate damage to borderland wildlife and resources.

¹ "A fence in the middle of nowhere," Austin American-Statesmen, Editorial Board, Wednesday, October 3, 2007.

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-10)

Over the years, Congress has passed many good laws to preserve the natural environment and safeguard human health. The passage of H.R. 2593 will ensure that the authority of law is maintained and that decades of work to protect God's creation are not undone in a matter of months.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Baptists

Church World Service, Immigration and Refugee Program

Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL)

Columban Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Office

Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM)

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Hispanic Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Justice, Peace/Integrity of Creation Office

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Council of Churches of Christ, USA

National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office

Standing For Truth Foundation

The Union for Reform Judaism

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

The United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society

West Coast Mennonite Central Committee