



Final Position Statement

The Impact of Border Security Measures on Wildlife

The United States has the right and responsibility to secure its borders against entry by terrorists, smugglers, and others engaged in illegal activities, but border security measures can have a deleterious impact on wildlife. Because healthy wildlife populations and secure borders are both important goals to Americans, implementation of border security measures is a complex issue with both costs and benefits. There are trade-offs between achieving these two goals, and one cannot be maximized without some detriment to the other. Therefore, the costs of border protection, in terms of potential deleterious impacts on wildlife, need to be carefully evaluated against the benefits that secure borders provide.

The Secure Fence Act of 2006 mandates the US Department of Homeland Security to construct steel fences three to four meters high along large sections of the US-Mexico border between San Diego, California, and Brownsville, Texas, totaling over 1,100 km. Impermeable border fences, can reduce vehicle and human movement in sensitive habitats, can also limit demographic and genetic interchange among wildlife populations, and the ability of species to shift ranges in response to local weather conditions, normal seasonal movement and, ultimately, climate change. Section 102(c) of the Real ID Act of 2005 allows the Secretary of Homeland Security to treat construction of roads and barriers along US borders as exempt from all federal, state, and local environmental laws, including the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act. Waiving environmental analysis for border security measures means there is no opportunity to assess impacts to wildlife and habitats, or to design or adopt reasonable mitigations that could avoid or reduce impacts while still achieving border security objectives.

The US-Mexico border forms a boundary for at least eleven US and three Mexican designated conservation areas including wildlife refuges, national parks, and biosphere reserves. An impermeable fence along the US-Mexico border could prohibit cross-border movement of a wide range of species including jaguar, ocelot, jaguarundi, Mexican gray wolf, Sonoran pronghorn, bighorn sheep, black bear, desert tortoise, pygmy-owl (since most of its flights are less than 3 feet from the ground), kit fox, badger, North American porcupine, and black-tailed prairie dog. An impermeable fence could harm local wildlife populations by limiting access to rare resources such as water.

The US-Canada border forms a boundary for at least 17 US and eight Canadian designated conservation areas including refuges, national, state, and provincial parks. Mammals that historically ranged freely across the US-Canada border and for which continuing free movement is vitally important include gray wolf, woodland caribou, fisher, grizzly bear, Canada lynx, wolverine, black-footed ferret, and mountain goat.

The policy of The Wildlife Society in regard to the impact of border security measures on wildlife is to:

1. Recommend that Congress repeal section 102(c) of the Real ID Act of 2005, so that the construction of roads and barriers along US borders are no longer exempt from all federal, state, and local environmental laws.
2. Support new legislation to require the Department of Homeland Security to (a) determine the effects that border security structures and operations will have on wildlife and explore alternatives to impermeable fences, and (b) require compliance with environmental laws.
3. Request that the Secretary of Interior (through the Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service) and the Secretary for Homeland Security identify and implement measures that will mitigate negative impacts of existing and potential border security structures to wildlife.
4. Request that the Secretary for Homeland Security issue a moratorium on further construction of fences along the U.S.-Mexico border, to allow the Secretary and the Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service to investigate and consider reasonable alternatives to an impenetrable barrier. Study and mitigation are needed not only for physical barriers, but also for patrol activities, manipulation of vegetation, and the virtual fence under construction along some portions of the US-Mexico border.
5. Support research on alternatives to impermeable fences, such as combinations of vehicle barriers, electronic surveillance, and various designs of crossing structures. Successful alternatives should be used as models in other areas as appropriate.
6. Support research on the impacts to wildlife stemming from other border security measures, including stadium lighting, wide swaths cleared of vegetation, and patrol by vehicles and low-flying aircraft.
7. Support adequate funding for and implementation of projects to reduce damage to borderland wildlife and habitat.

Approved by Council February 2010. Expires March 2018.