



May 21, 2026

The Honorable Markwayne Mullin  
Secretary  
United States Department of Homeland Security  
1880 2nd Street Southwest  
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Mullin:

We write to you today as former superintendents and a former deputy superintendent of Big Bend National Park, with 259 collective years of National Park Service (NPS) experience, to urge you to reject the waiver of federal laws that would allow physical barriers and roads, as well as related border security infrastructure, to be built inside the park in the absence of environmental or cultural compliance or public involvement.

If a border wall—or other unnecessary and highly destructive border infrastructure—is built inside Big Bend National Park, it would be the most egregious assault on the integrity of the entire National Park System since the construction of a dam in the Hetchy Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park more than a century ago.

We all agree that we need a secure border at Big Bend. Collectively, we have spent decades working with the Border Patrol and local law enforcement leaders to ensure so. But a physical wall, additional paved roads, vehicle barriers, or other large scale infrastructure projects within the park are not the way to accomplish this.

The fact is that the rugged terrain, natural barriers, isolation, and distance from highways in Mexico are the reasons this area already has, by far, the lowest level of illegal activity of the entire border -- and the entire Big Bend Sector, which your most recent waivers have invoked. The Sector, and the national park in particular, are not an area of high illegal entry, which is a prerequisite for your invoking the waiver.

And we're not alone in our opposition. When a wall through Big Bend was proposed in February, there was a visceral, bipartisan outcry against the insult of an unnecessary, ridiculously expensive 30-foot steel wall whose one-size-fits-all approach makes no sense in west Texas. Five Big Bend area sheriffs have publicly made that point, as have the 14 judges that represent all of Texas' border counties. 46 state legislators have said the same, and more than 130,000 Americans have signed an online petition.

We also have grave concerns that installing vehicle barriers, building new patrol roads, and paving any existing unpaved roads in the park's remote backcountry are unnecessary for border security and also very harmful to what people care about in the national park. Not only is there no risk of vehicles crossing the river in these locations, but the landscape would be altered forever for minimal improvements to security, if any. It would require massive infrastructure installation and significant terrain modification to cross dozens of desert washes subject to flash flooding, and it would be vulnerable to damage in future flash floods. It would likely be a significant visual intrusion and almost certainly damage the plants, animals and iconic desert beauty.

The diminishment of the area's wild character, impeded access to the Rio Grande for recreation, and loss of opportunities to experience the darkest night sky in the nation if the infrastructure were lighted, would cause tremendous damage to the area's economy, which is highly dependent upon tourism.

Installing buried or above-ground communications or power cables along backcountry roads in the park would also damage the landscape, require expensive and frequent maintenance, and is technologically unnecessary as communications with sensors can continue to be done wirelessly. If wireless communications need to be improved, there are far less obtrusive means to accomplish that.

It is for this reason we urge you to not issue any waivers of environmental or historic preservation laws, and to offer your proposals, with alternatives, for public review and input. If upgrades to the existing robust electronic sensor system are needed, and can be accomplished as unobtrusively as the existing installations, we have no concerns with that. As the existing system is a collaborative effort of the Border Patrol, the NPS, and county sheriffs, so should be any improvements -- and no waivers are necessary, as the existing systems work. The federal agencies have a long and successful history of working together in support of both agency missions, as required by the still-valid 2006 Memorandum of Understanding between Homeland Security and the land management agencies regarding cooperative national security on federal borderlands.

The Border Patrol used to provide funding to the NPS to maintain park roads patrolled by their agents that are stationed in the park. That no longer occurs, and with the erosion in park staffing since early 2025, we acknowledge that some of those roads are in poor condition. With no need for a waiver, that funding could be resumed, or enhanced, to assure that the existing unpaved roads in the park near the border are restored to the condition both agencies agreed to years ago.

There does not need to be a conflict between a strong border, a thriving local economy, and conservation of the wildest, most intact landscapes of Texas and our nation. If Customs and Border Protection would engage the public, local elected officials, sheriffs, and the National Park Service, we are absolutely confident that we can find a solution to realistically improve border security at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer.

But if you issue a waiver that will not be possible. And the unique, nationally significant landscape, natural resources, and cultural heritage of Big Bend National Park, one of the nation's crown jewels, will be irreparably damaged, and we fear that any sense of commitment to shared stewardship of the nation's borderland between your agency and the one we devoted our careers to will be as well.

Sincerely,

Bob Krumenaker, Superintendent 2018 - 2023, and Chair, Keep Big Bend Wild

David Elkowitz, Deputy Superintendent 2019 - 2022

Cindy Ott-Jones, Superintendent 2012 - 2017

Bill Wellman, Superintendent 2006 - 2012

John H. King, Superintendent 2003 - 2006

Robert Arnberger, Superintendent 1991 - 1994

H. Gilbert Lusk, Superintendent 1981 - 1986