

Border wall outcries fall on deaf ears

BY KARA GERBERT
Managing Editor

The ongoing controversy involving the building of a border wall in Big Bend looks to be forging ahead, despite multiple organizations and conservation advocates' pleas, as well as comments from Customs and Border Protection's Commissioner Rodney Scott to the contrary.

On May 21, six former superintendents from Big Bend National Park with numerous years of experience in the National Park Service penned a letter to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin, urging him to reject the waiver of federal laws allowing physical barriers and roads, as well as other disruptive infrastructure, inside the areas of the parks and the river corridor. These same superintendents have penned a second letter, dated this past Monday, June 15, 2026.

Mullin waived no less than 31 federal laws, as well as state and local laws and regulations, on June 9, and then turned around and awarded multi-billion-dollar contracts for the very structures that Commis-

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Rainfall totals at Alpine-Casparis Airport

2026 7.72"
June 2.72"



Burn Ban ON

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PLEASE REMEMBER TO
THANK A VETERAN,
A MEMBER OF THE
ARMED FORCES,
OR A LAW ENFORCEMENT
OFFICER EVERY DAY.



Opinions

Honorable Markwayne Mullin, we respectfully suggest...

We write to you again, following up on our letter from May 21, 2026. We are six former superintendents and a former deputy superintendent of Big Bend National Park, with over 250 collective years of National Park Service (NPS) experience.

In our previous letter, we urged 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.

On June 9, 2026, you waived not just those federal laws, but all state and local laws and regulations, and legal requirements deriving from, or related to the subject of, the federal statutes you summarily overrode. This was devastating news, though not unexpected.

We write today to respectfully suggest that it is still possible to enhance border security in Big Bend National Park without destroying what makes it one of America's most treasured landscapes. But it will take a commitment on your part, and enforced restraint on the part of your contractors, to avoid wholesale and unaccountable destruction of the park's natural, cultural, and scenic resources, as well as a major negative hit to the region's tourism-dependent economy.

A secure border and conserving America's natural and cultural resources do not have to be in conflict.

Accordingly, we recommend the following:

- **Vehicle Barriers:** CBP proposes 17 miles of metal vehicle barriers, in 4 locations. As there is no history, nor risk, of vehicles crossing the Rio Grande at the two middle locations, we urge you to strike these from your plans. While our collective experience indicates that the risk at the two other locations is extremely low, any vehicles that did successfully cross the Rio at

these locations would immediately head for the nearest paved roads, which are located just a few miles away outside park boundaries. Restrict these barriers to lands outside the park, and they will accomplish the same purpose. We also ask for assurances that non-vehicular access

to public lands in the national park not be restricted by any vehicular barriers.

- **Additional Patrol Roads:** There are already paved and unpaved roads that roughly parallel most of the border in the national park, regularly utilized by US Border Patrol (USBP) agents for their patrols. While the 51-mile unpaved River Road is not as close to the Rio Grande as the proposed new road, it is where migrants that do manage to cross the Rio Grande in the park are most frequently apprehended. There is no security benefit to apprehending them a bit closer to the river. Upgrade the River Road if it is necessary, preferably no higher than the standard long ago agreed to by the agencies on the ground. Constructing a new parallel road would cause huge devastation to a vast unroaded section of the national park, in some cases requiring blasting of mountains.

- **Sensors and Communication and Power Cables:** There are currently hundreds of electronic surveillance devices in the national park and surrounding areas, maintained jointly by USBP, NPS, and county sheriffs. These are all battery or solar-powered, communicate wirelessly, and in almost all cases visually and environmentally unobtrusive. The local power grid is notoriously unreliable, with blackouts often lasting for days. Many of the areas proposed for underground cables are in unstable environments subject to severe flash flooding; others, in rocky terrain, would require blasting to



BOB KRUMENAKER
BBNP Superintendent-Retired, and Chair, Keep Big Bend Wild

construct. Fiber optic cables will quickly be technologically obsolete.

We urge you to reconsider the sensor configuration and improve or enhance the existing network with updated technology and improved wireless communications.

It would be far less intrusive, quicker to deploy, and more nimble to move to other areas if the needs change, less environmentally destructive, and a vast saving of taxpayer funds.

It is our understanding that advanced aerial surveillance systems, including high-altitude drones, have been successfully used for detection purposes in other areas of the border with great success, and as you know, these have been recommended by the local sheriffs who know the border and security issues in this area as well as anyone.

- **Laydown and Staging Areas and Construction Camps:** Big Bend National Park is the most sensitive environment on the entire US-Mexican border. Clearing of large areas to facilitate construction, again in the absence of oversight or accountability by the NPS, will unnecessarily damage park resources and cause permanent visual scars. We urge you to keep these to existing paved sites in the park or to use areas outside park boundaries. There is not enough water or wastewater capacity in the park's utility systems to accommodate a large number of workers, and with DHS waiving the NPS Organic Act and General Authorities Act, it's unclear if NPS would even be able to enforce unrelated park rules if needed to restrain the conduct of workers even when they are not on the job.

- **Water Use:** Please truck in all water needed for construction activities rather than overtax the parks' existing wells and delivery systems. New wells would

further deplete precious groundwater resources needed both for park residents and visitors, as well as wildlife, including endangered animals. While you have waived the Endangered Species Act, you don't have to violate its intent with impunity.

- **Lighting:** Your published plans indicate that utility poles near the Boquillas Port of Entry will be lit, and shielding *may* be installed to reduce light spillage. That contradicts Commissioner Scott's commitment that there will be no lighting. We urge you to do as Mr. Scott said you would.

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 meaningfully engage the public, local elected officials, sheriffs, and the National Park Service in a sincere effort to improve border security and to — as Commissioner Scott said, representing you — minimize harm to the greatest extent practicable, we are absolutely confident that there are solutions that would satisfy your operational needs and not unduly harm one of the nation's most iconic national parks. It would also have the potential to rebuild trust with the people of Texas, which has been severely damaged by your Department's unilateral actions to date.

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

LETTERS

Send us your letters.

Please include your name, address and phone number for verification purposes. Only your name and city will be published.

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Send your letters to kara.gerbert@alpineavalanche.com by noon Monday for consideration.

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ALPINE AVALANCHE (014 800) is published every Thursday morning at 704 E. Holland Ave., Alpine, TX 79830. Periodical postage paid at Alpine, TX.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Alpine Avalanche, P.O. Box 719, Alpine, TX 79831.

Subscription rates in Brewster, Jeff Davis and Presidio counties are \$42 per year, \$48 in-state and \$52 elsewhere.

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sioner Scott stated would not be happening.

The waiver allows for “the construction of physical barriers and roads (including, but not limited to, accessing the project areas, creating and using staging areas, the conduct of earthwork, excavation, fill, and site preparation, and installation and upkeep of physical barriers, roads, and supporting elements, drainage, erosion controls, safety features, lighting, cameras, and sensors) in the project area.”

Commissioner Scott was quoted as saying, “The Big Bend area contains some of the most unique and important scenery and archeological landscapes in Texas, and it is valued accordingly. Big Bend National Park and its associated areas also support the local and regional economy. DHS recognizes this along with the intrinsic importance these areas hold for Texans and others who visit and enjoy them. Border security measures in Big Bend National Park or the Big Bend Ranch State Park will be adapted to the terrain and will use technology, such as cameras and sensors, along with

a limited number of low-profile vehicle barriers and patrol roads strategically placed to leverage the landscape as a natural deterrent. Additionally, lighting will not be installed due to environmental considerations and operational requirements.”

Retired Big Bend National Park Superintendent and Chair of Keep Big Bend Wild, Bob Krumenaker commented, “We’re not surprised that DHS has waived all laws in the national park, as this could be devastating. The former superintendents are making this open appeal to the Secretary, appealing to his patriotism, that he does not have to destroy what makes Big Bend one of Texas’s (and America’s) greatest places to improve border security. Our letter is an appeal, but also a guide, to how they can achieve their mission and still protect Big Bend National Park and surrounding lands.”

Area advocates for the sanctity of Big Bend are continuing to contact their representatives as well as Customs and Border Protection and the Department of Homeland Security, pleading with them

to keep physical barriers from being erected, which would not only have devastating effects on the natural environment and its wildlife, but also destroy the lifeblood of the region: tourism.

David Elkowitz began his National Park Service career in Big Bend National Park as a seasonal employee in 1985, completing more than 22 years in this park alone, before retiring in 2022 as Deputy Superintendent. He still lives in the Big Bend region today.

“It is very hard to put my lifelong love, care, work, hope, and dreams of the park and area into words. Big Bend National Park is a place of utterly unique wildness and beauty, offering opportunities for solitude and incredible biodiversity that are exemplary and inspiring.” Elkowitz said.

“I always consider and remember that the park was created as the Texas Gift to the Nation and donated to the country to be protected as a National Park for the public to use and to protect. It is of the greatest importance that the park be accessible and undiminished for the many who visit.”

