



# The Current State of the Border Fence

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## Introduction

Recognizing the effectiveness of physical barriers as a means of border control, Congress first mandated the construction of a border fence in 1996 as part of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). IIRIRA called for the construction of a 14-mile, triple-layered fence along the boundary between San Diego and Tijuana.<sup>1</sup>

By 2004, only nine miles of fencing were completed. Congress subsequently passed the Secure Fence Act of 2006. That legislation called for double-layered fencing along the border, augmented by manpower and technology, and directed the Secretary of Homeland security to construct “reinforced fencing along not fewer than 700 miles of the southwest border, in locations where fencing is deemed most practical and effective.”<sup>2</sup>

## How much of the required fencing has been completed?

Currently, U.S. Customs and Border Protection maintains several types of “tactical infrastructure” (fencing, other physical barriers, and support structures such as observation towers) along the border. Chief among these are:



**Primary Pedestrian Fencing** – that runs directly along the border and is intended to prevent crossings on foot.



**Secondary Fencing** – that runs behind Primary Fencing, usually separated by a Patrol Road that allows the Border Patrol to monitor the area between fences.



**Tertiary Pedestrian Fencing** – that runs behind the Secondary Fencing, intended to prevent attempts to cross the border on foot.



**Vehicle Fencing** – that prohibits motorized vehicles from crossing.

As of May 2015, DHS had installed:

- 353 miles of Primary Pedestrian Fencing.
- 36 miles of Secondary Fencing.
- 14 miles of Tertiary Pedestrian Fencing.
- 300 miles of Vehicle Fencing.

These numbers are virtually the same as the numbers available in 2012, indicating no measurable progress. But, given the growth in worldwide migration and the emergence of new threats along the southern border, it is essential that the fence be completed and supplemented by other security structures – including walls where appropriate.

To date, sixty-five other countries have built security fences and other barriers to protect themselves from large scale migration and the infiltration of terrorists.<sup>3</sup> Fences do not guarantee security, but they are an integral tool for securing borders and send the message that would-be migrants are expected to enter the country through the proper channels.



### **Building a New and Improved Border Fence**

Much of the existing barrier along the southern border hardly qualifies as a fence or wall. In fact, many stretches consist of nothing more than a “vehicle barrier” that fails to slow down foot traffic.<sup>4</sup> The remainder of the fence is a mixture of easily climbed, poorly installed corrugated panels and other *ad hoc* materials. Only short stretches is a

heavy-duty barrier installed in a concrete footing or double-layered fencing separated by a patrol road.

The Trump administration has promised to build a better security barrier on the southern border. Since making this a priority, there have been numerous estimates on what such an endeavor would cost. The primary plan includes a constructing a single-layer wall in the most problematic areas where a sufficient barrier does not exist.

The cost estimates for constructing this border fence have ranged from as low as low as \$8 billion (President Trump's initial estimate from the campaign trail), to as high as \$40 billion.<sup>5</sup> The estimate most often quoted by political and construction experts, is between \$15 and \$25 billion. This figure was derived by Bernstein, a leading development research firm that specializes in large-scale building projects.<sup>6</sup>



There are a few possible scenarios based on the upper and lower echelons of current Bernstein cost estimates:

- A 1000 mile long, 40 foot high wall that goes 7 feet underground and is 10 inches thick, would cost approximately \$25 million/mile to construct based on current concrete costs, land buyouts, labor and other related costs.
- Shorten the wall to 750 miles at \$25 million/mile and the estimate drops to somewhere around \$18.75 billion.

- If President Trump can fulfill his campaign promise of negotiating costs to their lowest and achieve a total cost of \$15 billion for a 1,000 mile wall, the bill would become approximately \$15 million/mile.
- Under the preceding scenario of \$15 million/mile, a 750 mile wall could be built for approximately \$11.25 billion.

Bernstein bases their model on the effective design that Israel used for its concrete wall on the West Bank. This is a reasonable comparison because the objective is largely the same, and much of the U.S. border fence will be in sandy, desert terrain as well – land that requires a strong and deep foundation due to shifting dunes. Based on the inefficient system the federal government uses to contract for building services, a \$25 billion price tag is likely the most realistic. However, President Trump has stated that he believes his administration can keep the costs to the lower end of the prevailing estimates, between \$15 and \$25 billion.

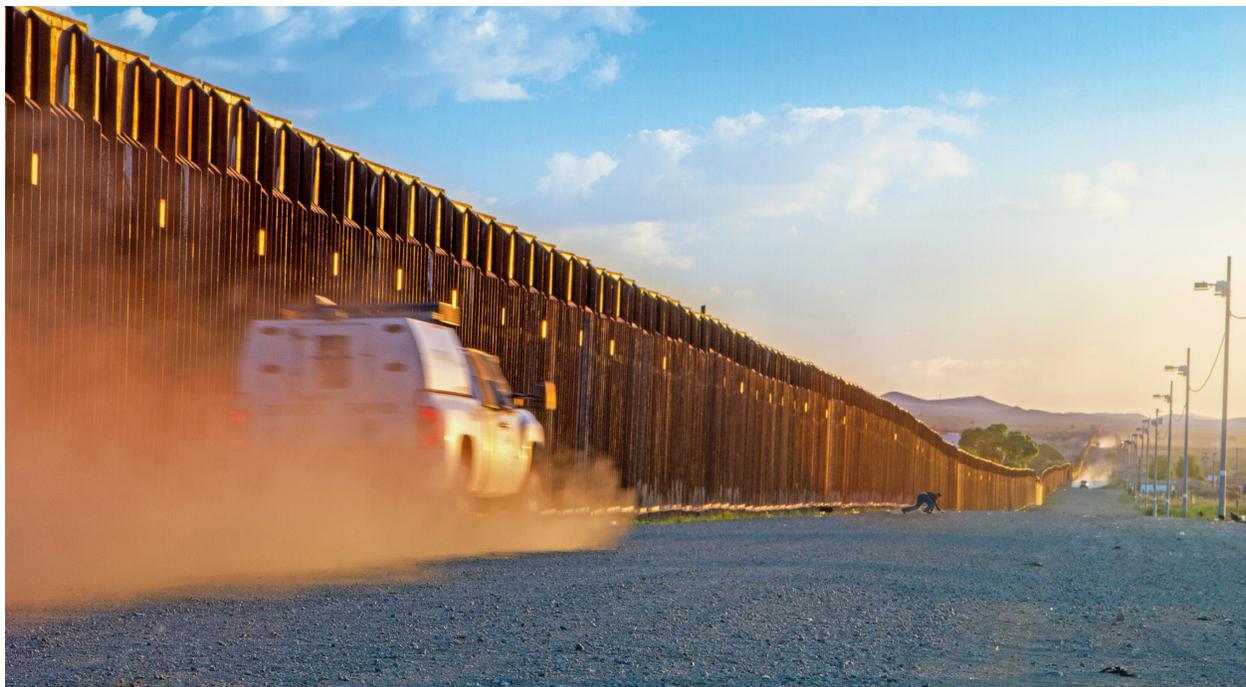


After initial construction, especially if high-tech monitoring devices are installed, there will be annual maintenance costs. These next-generation devices are already being tested and used along the southern border. Annual total maintenance costs have varied greatly since the Secure Fence Act was passed. They range from a low of \$115 million in FY 2006, to a high of \$1.2 billion in FY 2008 before eventually stabilizing at around \$400 million in FY 2012.<sup>7</sup> Nailing down a specific, static cost for maintaining a well-secured border is hard to estimate. It can reasonably be assumed that annual maintenance will cost considerably more than it has in the past. Maintenance of an effective border barrier is likely to cost as much, or more, than the FY 2006 high of \$1.2

billion. However, a well maintained border barrier is likely to reduce some of the high costs associated with interior immigration enforcement.

Another possibility, should cost, environmental concerns and technical difficulties become a major concern, would be to construct more double-layered wired fence in low-traffic areas instead of a concrete wall. Combined with hi-tech monitoring equipment such as ground sensors and aerial monitoring, this approach could yield success comparable to that experienced by other nations, such as Israel, that have built similar barriers in lightly-populated deserts.<sup>8</sup> Assuming that the construction costs for double-layered fencing are considerably less than those for a concrete wall, and taking into account that much of the border with Mexico is in remote areas where wire fencing might be effective, the savings could be substantial. President-elect Trump, the Department of Homeland Security and Congress will have to conduct a careful cost-benefit analysis to determine which construction method is appropriate for each sector of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Regardless of which approach is taken, securing the southern border is a sound fiscal investment. The overall construction and annual maintenance costs pale when compared to the \$11. billion FAIR estimates illegal immigration costs American taxpayers.<sup>9</sup> In fact, if the project only results in a 5 percent reduction in the annual cost of illegal immigration to American taxpayers, and construction and maintenance costs reach the most expensive estimates, it would pay for itself after only six years.<sup>10</sup>



## Conclusion

In 2006, Congress required that a barrier be constructed. But the project was never completed as mandated, and much of the border wall/fence lies in disrepair or is built to subpar standards. With illegal immigration, drug trafficking and human smuggling an ongoing problem, and the threat of terrorism ever increasing, it is critical that a proper security barrier be constructed.

A physical barrier on the southern border is a necessity if our government wishes to meet its obligation to protect the sovereignty and security of the United States of America. Besides helping stem the tide of illegal immigration, it also limits the ability of drug cartels, human traffickers, terrorists and other national security threats to access the United States from Mexico and the rest of Central and South America. Furthermore, a secure border sends the message that prospective immigrants are expected to follow the rule of law.

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<sup>1</sup> CRS Report for Congress, "Border Security: The San Diego Fence," 2007, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/RS22026.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> GovTrack, "H.R. 6061 (109th): Secure Fence Act of 2006," <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/109/hr6061/summary#libraryofcongress>

<sup>3</sup> *DailyMail*, "World of walls: How 65 countries have erected fences on their borders – four times as many as when the Berlin Wall was toppled – as governments try to hold back the tide of migrants," 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3205724/How-65-countries-erected-security-walls-borders.html>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. National Park Service, "International Border Vehicle Barrier," <https://www.nps.gov/orpi/playourvisit/barrier.htm>

<sup>5</sup> *The Washington Post*, "Trump's dubious claim that his border wall would cost \$8 billion", <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/02/11/trumps-dubious-claim-that-his-border-wall-would-cost-8-billion/>

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, "Bernstein Materials Blast: Who Would Profit from The Trump Wall?," 2016, <http://fronterasdesk.org/sites/default/files/field/docs/2016/07/Bernstein-%20The%20Trump%20Wall.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Marc R. Rosenblum, "What Would a Secure Border Look Like," Hearing Before The Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, 2013

<sup>8</sup> *BBC News*, "Q&A: What is the West Bank barrier?," 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3111159.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3111159.stm)

<sup>9</sup> Federation for American Immigration Reform, "The Fiscal Burden of Illegal Immigration on United States Taxpayers," 2017, <https://fairus.org/issue/publications-resources/fiscal-burden-illegal-immigration-united-states-taxpayers>

<sup>10</sup> *ImmigrationReform.com*, "Hillary Clinton Claims U.S. Can't Afford Border Fence," 2016, <http://immigrationreform.com/2016/01/12/hillary-clinton-claims-u-s-cant-afford-border-fence/>