

Border Standoff

The potential for a wall cutting off water access in Big Bend has local recreators up in arms.

BY SAM NORTON

Once the Rio Grande exits El Paso, Texas, the mighty river shrinks and slowly meanders hundreds of miles southeast through arid desert, before mountain streams rejuvenate it near the sleepy town of Presidio. Soon after, sandy flatlands give way to dramatic cliffs soaring from a mosaic of limestone, sandstone, and volcanic rock, just before the river takes a sudden turn to the northeast. It's here that Texas boasts its crown jewel of public lands: Big Bend National Park.

Billy Bartko, along with his wife, Jessica, have owned the local outfitter, Far Flung Outdoor Center, for over two years. But he's been mesmerized for decades by the seemingly untouched desert landscape.

So he was appalled when, in February, then-Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem announced her department would construct a border wall through the park; the federal government wanted to block off his backyard.

Following the announcement, Bartko and the rest of the Big Bend community were furious.

At the time of Noem's announcement, an online DHS map showed a physical wall through much of the national park. It stood thousands of feet away from the river in some places to avoid steep canyons, worrying locals that it would completely cut off access to the Rio Grande from the park.

The result: The popular river trips the area is known for would be nearly impossible from the American side. "If they build it, you can never go back," Bartko said of the wall.

Losing that access would be devastating for local outfitters and visitors alike. According to Bartko, the end

of daily and overnight river trips would eliminate 25 to 75% of Far Flung's business. Erica Little, owner of the Big Bend Boating and Hiking Company, described it candidly: "Floating through the most dramatic canyons would only be a memory."

Bartko and dozens of others spent months protesting in the tiny gateway town of Terlingua since the announcement. Local sheriffs and judges immediately spoke out at town hall meetings and in newspaper interviews. A "No Big Bend Wall" petition was created, now with over 100,000 signatures, and thousands rallied at the Texas capitol in April to protest the wall. Far Flung has guests reaching out to their own representatives.

But the wall isn't guaranteed yet. The DHS's map of the proposed wall has been changed multiple times since February. Soon after Noem's announcement, the map showed a physical wall only within the nearby Big Bend Ranch State Park, but that didn't ease any fears.

"All the river companies pretty much run their half-day stretch inside the state park," Bartko said.

As of writing, the map indicates no physical wall in the national or state park, only "detection technology." But the plan is far from clear.

"The fact is that nobody knows, and no one will answer," Bartko said. "No one will say, 'This is what we're going to build.'"

The map will likely continue to shift. Far Flung is still holding off on purchasing \$20,000 worth of new river equipment, due to the uncertainty. Bartko and Little still believe a wall is likely. "In this region, we see contractors still scoping it out like they did not get the memo that it changed back to detection technology," Little explained.

PHOTO: JOSH ELDER

But Bartko believes that, even without a wall, upgraded technology will destroy Big Bend's recreation. Lights from motion detectors could ruin Big Bend's status as one of the world's largest dark sky preserves, and more guard towers could spoil sweeping desert vistas from hiking trails. "All of those things are equally destructive to the dark sky preservation and actually recreating in the Big Bend region," Bartko said.

"Even though [Noem has] been relieved of her duties as the head of DHS, no one has said, 'Hey, this was

an overreach,' or 'This was a mistake,'" Bartko added.

With no clear answer at the federal level, the local community remains wary. Losing the Rio Grande would devastate Big Bend recreation, so the West Texas community won't roll over easily.

"They can't just take this land," Bartko said. "We're not going to give it up willfully and freely, without some sort of fight."

▼ *Kayakers paddle through Rock Slide Rapid on the Santa Elena Canyon section of the Rio Grande.*

