

**Testimony of Mr. Reynaldo Anzaldua, Border Resident from Mission, TX to the
U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security,
Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation and Operations
Examining the Effect of the Border Wall on Private and Tribal Landowners**

February 27, 2020 - Washington, DC

It is an honor to testify before this distinguished Subcommittee about the severe harms President Trump's border wall would have on my family's land, my community and my country.

My name is Reynaldo Anzaldua and my family owns land in Mission, Texas, a city along the U.S.-Mexican border in the Rio Grande Valley. I am 75 years old, a Vietnam War Veteran, and a 30-year veteran of the former United States Customs Service of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, where I worked to inspect goods entering the United States at designated Ports of Entry along the border. I am also a native of the Rio Grande Valley of southern Texas, and I am here to share with you today what a new border wall would do to my home.

My family owns over 60 acres of land in the path of Trump's border wall. This land near the Rio Grande River has been in my family for generations. On these acres, my family ranches and leases the land to several dozen tenants, who enjoy the riverfront by fishing and jet skiing, among other activities. We like to spend time with family there, holding barbeques and relaxing near the Rio Grande. This is a peaceful place, and our neighbors are local institutions like La Lomita Chapel, a historic Catholic church from the 1800s, a small restaurant with a riverside patio, and Chimney Park, an RV community popular with retirees to the area.

There are so many ways the border wall will harm me and my family, but today I would like to focus on three. These include several issues with which you may not be familiar: (1) the long pattern of land divestment of low and middle-income Mexican-Americans along the border like my family, (2) the tens of thousands of acres that will be left between the border wall and the Rio Grande in a "no man's land" cut off from the world, and (3) the symbolic meaning of the border wall to the Rio Grande Valley, which would not exist without a vibrant and thriving border culture where goods and people move daily in both directions.

Long Pattern of Land Divestment of Mexican-American Landowners

Right now, my family and I are engaged in a fight to defend our land in the path of the border wall. Because we did not allow the government to enter our land to conduct surveying for purposes of measuring the land to build the border wall, President Trump's Department of Justice sued me and my family. The government only entered the land after a court ordered access.

We received an offer to sell letter from the government for the land, and my family is attempting to negotiate with them over how the government will pay us for the taking of our land. If we cannot agree, this could lead to the government suing the family again.

These lawsuits and and the dozens of others like them across the southwest border in Texas are unfortunately nothing new for my family, and fit within a long and tragic history of land divestment of Mexican-Americans in the border region. Through intimidation, fraud, and even violence, many Mexican-American families like mine lost their land sometimes dating all the way from Spanish land grants from the 1700s to today.

For over 60 years, I have borne witness to loss of land through eminent domain. It has been slow and steady, but always ends in the government winning and my family being left with little to show for it.

Over 10 years ago, the federal government during the Bush Administration tried to take my family's land in Granjeno, TX to build what was then called the "border fence" after the Secure Fence Act of 2006 was passed. Although they called it a fence in 2006 and call it a border wall today, its impact is the same.

Even before that, the government took land from a family member to build a new Port of Entry in Mission, TX, in the early 1990s. Before that still my family lost land for the development of a flood-control zone.

For me, President Trump's latest border wall project is just one more example of the lack of respect for land rights in the region I call home. This border wall will only waste the taxpayers' money for a vanity project that will lead to more deaths.

67 Square Miles of "No Man's Land" Between the River and the Wall

Additionally, the path of the border wall is not directly along the Rio Grande at all. Because the Trump Administration has decided to build its latest border walls along the path of an already-existing levee system in Hidalgo and Cameron Counties, the wall can lie over a mile inland in some areas. This leaves tens of thousands of acres of U.S. territory in what will become a "no man's land" cut off from the United States and the rest of the world. This land will be effectively inaccessible to property owners with land left on the wrong side of the wall.

In South Texas alone, if Trump's plans come to pass, about 67 square miles will lie between the river and the wall. That's about the size of Washington, DC.

This land is important and is made up of homes, wildlife preserves, ranchland, and sites that host many endangered species, such as the rare ocelot.

The border wall would orphan these massive parts of the Rio Grande Valley and lock them into an even more militarized zone. The Border Patrol says some owners will have gates to farm or visit their property behind the wall, but there are a lot of details that make this complicated. Who will know the codes to the gate, and who do we call if there are problems? What happens if the power goes out? What good is owning land if I have to be at the mercy of the government and ask their permission to access it? This is un-American.

Private Border Wall Impact

The border wall is also causing collateral damage through the actions of private groups emboldened by this government assault on our community.

A private group called “We Build the Wall” has built a private wall with no oversight. This group has no ties to or knowledge of my community, and is affiliated with Steve Bannon, Kris Kobach, and other Trump supporters.

Late last year, I began seeing construction of this private wall right next to my family’s property, right on the banks of the river. There are international treaties the United States has with Mexico that protect the river from damage by either country. By clearing vegetation from the riverbank, they have speeded up the erosion process and in the next flood, we will lose part of our land. Erosion caused by this new wall could even change the international boundary, which is defined as the river.

Because of this, there were two lawsuits filed against the private border wall, but both so far have failed to stop it. In these cases, the courts respected the rights of the landowner - a right that is being denied to my family.

Whether a wall is built far from the river or right on its banks, there is no way that this project can avoid environmental devastation and destruction of the community..

Impact on the Rio Grande Valley

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the Rio Grande Valley would not exist without the river that gives it its name, and that border walls go against everything that makes my home what it is. Three in four Rio Grande Valley residents oppose the border wall.

Today, the Rio Grande Valley is now home to over a million people on the U.S. side of the border, and our economy is fueled by trade, immigration and travel to and from Mexico. Without it, it would simply not be the same place.

Our water supply comes from the river. Building a wall both symbolically and physically cuts off the Valley from its lifeline.

As a retired official of the former U.S. Customs Service, I understand the importance of legitimate trade to both the Rio Grande Valley region and the rest of the United States. Without a vibrant culture of goods and people moving back and forth between Mexico and the United States, the society we take for granted could not exist.

This vibrant culture is threatened today by the border wall, which is expected to have 100-foot surveillance towers, 24/7 lighting, and a 150 foot enforcement zone complete with fleets of military-grade vehicles.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I would like to point out to this Subcommittee that the negative effects of the border wall are not hypothetical. There are a million real people in the Rio Grande Valley living with the effects of President Bush's failed border fence project today, and Trump's border wall will be no different.

While some landowners may be facing the threat of eminent domain for the first time, this man-made crisis is nothing new for me.

My family's property will become one of the many stuck in "no man's land" between the river and the wall, an area as large as our nation's capital city. All of this is in service of a project that most people in the Rio Grande Valley completely reject, and that is an insult to our American values.

Thank you to the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today, and I hope the Subcommittee does all within its power to be a check on this administration and its total abuse of border landowners' rights.

Respectfully submitted by:

Mr. Reynaldo Anzaldua