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Big Bend Wall Paused, but Ranchers Still Face Looming Threat to Land: 'We Stand to Lose Too Much'

BY ALLAIRE CONTE

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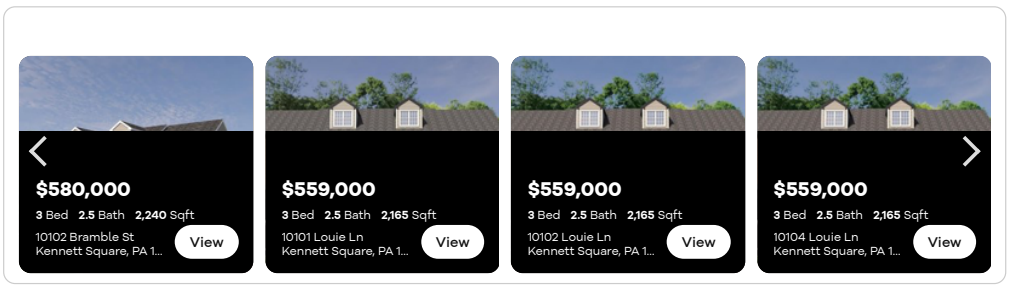
Bloomberg via Getty Images

The federal government has pushed ahead with plans for a new border barrier through the Big Bend region of West Texas, despite warnings from landowners that it could hurt their businesses and property values.

After mounting opposition to construction inside Big Bend National Park, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner **Rodney Scott** announced on Monday that he was temporarily pausing work there while he personally visits the region to review the project.

Yolanda Alvarado, a fifth-generation cattle rancher in the area, greeted the news with relief—and skepticism.

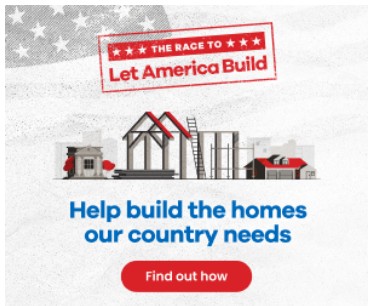


"We're happy that there's a halt in the national park, so there's not more destruction being done," Alvarado tells Realtor.com®.

But, she adds, "It's hard to see if this is a PR ploy or if he's actually serious about stopping construction in the national park or along the border. So there's a lot of mixed emotions there."

Further complicating the situation is a separate plan for roughly 175 miles of border barrier through Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, and Presidio counties, which isn't covered by the new pause. An estimated 400 landowners in the Big Bend region—including Alvarado—could be affected.

Some have already received letters seeking access to their property and warning that, if the government cannot acquire the rights it needs voluntarily, it can pursue condemnation through eminent domain.



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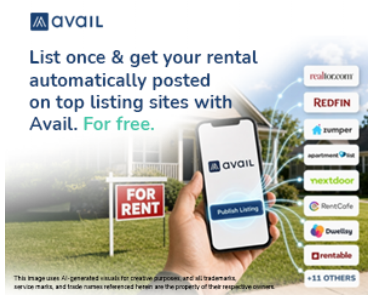

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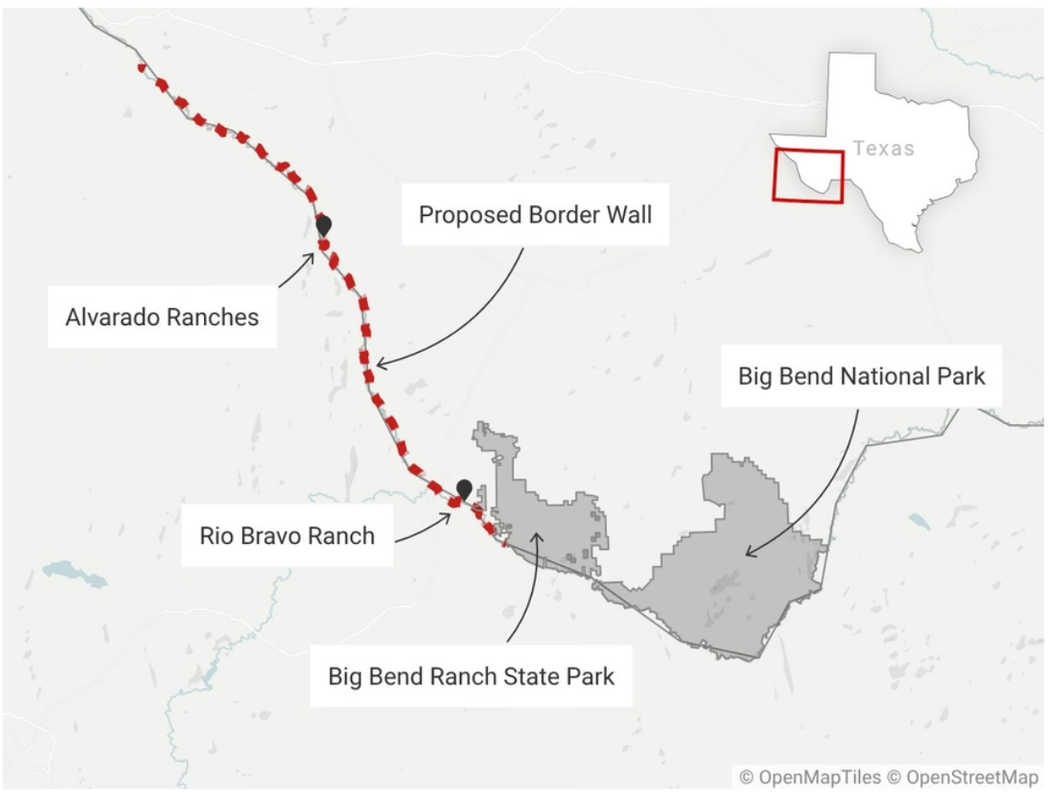
In the words of **Lauren Cecil**, whose Rio Bravo Ranch is among the properties approached in connection with the project, "We stand to lose too much, to give the Rio Grande away."

Walling off the river—and everything that comes with it

Farm to Market Road 170 (FM 170) is also known as the River Road, or *El Camino del Rio*, for a reason. The scenic highway follows the Rio Grande between Presidio and Lajitas, at times threading between the river and the mountains.

That's where Cecil and her husband, **Charlie**, have their ranch. Under the current plan, she says, the wall would separate their property from the Rio Grande.



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At a meeting with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Cecil says an official walked her through what would be built there: a road, a 30-foot wall, and a patrol road between FM 170 and the river.

"I looked him dead in the eye and I said, 'And do you think that's going to fit there?'" Cecil recalls. She says the official answered: "'No, absolutely not. There's not room for all that there.'"

That could fundamentally change life for the ranchers and wildlife that call this stretch of the Chihuahuan Desert home, cutting them off from a critical water source while threatening the tourism economy built around the river.

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“When I first found out about the border wall build, my immediate thought was ... our access to the river,” Alvarado says. If cattle are cut off from that water, she adds, “it’s going to completely disrupt the cattle operation.”

Presidio County’s 147 farms and ranches cover more than 2.3 million acres, nearly all of it pastureland, according to the latest U.S. Census of Agriculture. The county supports nearly 34,000 cattle and calves, and 88% of its agricultural operations are family-owned.

Cecil describes the same problem at Rio Bravo Ranch.

“They only have the Rio Grande to drink from,” she says of cattle grazing on the property.

Then there is another concern: what happens when the river rises.

The Presidio Valley flood-control system protects roughly 52 square miles of urban and agricultural land. Local officials have challenged wall plans over concerns that adding barriers and other infrastructure around the levee could interfere with the movement of floodwater and increase flooding on surrounding properties.

That risk is particularly salient at Rio Bravo Ranch. The property sits near the confluence of Alamito Creek and the Rio Grande, and Cecil says portions of it have already flooded six times this year.

Ranchers have come together to protest the construction and protect the land they’ve shepherded for generations. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Rio Grande is also part of daily family life at Lauren Cecil’s Rio Bravo ranch. “We swim in the river. Our children swim in the river,” she says. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

‘That land is worth a lot more than that’

The Fifth Amendment requires the government to pay just compensation when it takes private property for public use. But landowners here worry that the offers they have seen do not account for everything they could lose.

A U.S. Justice Department study of previous border-wall acquisitions, summarized by the Texas Real Estate Research Center at Texas A&M, found no automatic decline in agricultural land values simply because a wall was present. But it identified access, water rights, irrigation, the amount of land in a floodway, and development potential among the factors that can significantly influence what rural property is worth.

It's an intuitive connection for local landowners.

“A lot of the land is valuable because it has river access,” Alvarado says. “So once you take that away ... we’re going to lose a lot of property value.”

Yet she says one affected owner was initially offered about $250 an acre, and later roughly $300 an acre, for property connected to the wall project. Realtor.com was not able to immediately confirm the details of the offer.

“If you’re ranching or farming on that land, that land is worth a lot more than that,” Alvarado adds.

At the very least, the offer seems at odds with what similar properties have been selling for. Large rural tracts in Far West Texas sold for a median of $630 an acre in the year ending in the first quarter of 2026, according to the Texas Real Estate Research Center.

And for some owners, the potential losses go well beyond the acreage in the wall’s path.

At Rio Bravo Ranch, the Cecils operate a short-term rental from an adobe home overlooking the Rio Grande and surrounding mountains. Cecil says the proposed wall would put that view behind 30 feet of steel.

“If you go out the back door, you’re going to see a wall,” she says. “I’m not going to have a view to advertise.”

In a region where the landscape itself drives economic value, altering it can carry costs beyond the land directly affected. Presidio’s economic development strategy identifies the area’s natural assets as drivers of agriculture and tourism and calls for developing the city as a destination for eco-tourism.

Now, landowners want Texas to step in

With construction inside Big Bend National Park temporarily paused, landowners are trying to turn that reprieve into a larger moratorium across the state.

Cecil says the open landscape is central to what draws people to the Big Bend region—and what she fears the proposed wall would change: "A wall does not make something wide open spaces." AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Their first opportunity comes on Tuesday, as Scott visits the Big Bend region. Alvarado tells Realtor.com she hoped to meet with him, though nothing had been formally scheduled as of Monday night.

Then on Wednesday, local landowners plan to take their case to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission's annual public hearing in Austin.

While the commission can't stop a federal condemnation proceeding, they're hoping Texas officials will use what leverage they do have.

"Texas Parks and Wildlife is also a landowner," Alvarado says. "So it's really important for us to have Texas Parks and Wildlife represent landowners and stand up against the federal government for themselves also."

There's also precedent for that kind of intervention.

Gov. **Greg Abbott** said on Monday that Homeland Security Secretary **Markwayne Mullin** had assured him a wall or fence would not be built inside Big Bend National Park, and suggested their conversation helped prompt Scott's subsequent pause.

And last month, Land Commissioner **Dawn Buckingham** ordered federal contractors off state-controlled land in Presidio County after the General Land Office said crews had cleared more than a mile without permission. Buckingham said the work disrupted grazing acreage and devalued the state's lease.

The landowners Realtor.com spoke to say they're hoping the state will show the same willingness to defend their way of life.

Alvarado says she wants Parks and Wildlife commissioners—and Abbott—to "stand up for the state park and landowner rights."

And if this week does not produce a broader halt, they don't plan to stop there.

"It's got to be every opportunity to speak out," Cecil says, including chances to "peacefully assemble and speak in front of people who can make changes."

Alvarado says the landowner coalition is also preparing additional steps that could emerge in September.

Her ultimate goal is straightforward: "I'd like a full stop on all construction," she says.

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