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Final miles of U.S.-Mexico line likely to be fortified despite foes

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WASHINGTON - A ragged fence and a canyon called Smugglers Gulch mark the westernmost stretch of the California-Mexico border, a favorite crossing point for illegal immigrants and drug runners.

The federal government and a powerful local Republican congressman have been pushing for years to fortify the 3 1/2-mile stretch of border just north of Tijuana, Mexico. Their plan is opposed by California coastal regulators and environmentalists who say it could harm a fragile estuary.

Now supporters may be getting closer to victory. A provision in an immigration bill expected to pass the House next week would give the Homeland Security secretary authority to move forward with the project regardless of any laws that stand in the way and would bar courts from hearing lawsuits against it.

"We need to get this thing done, and we need to do it for security reasons, and at some point we just need to do it," said House Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., whose district is just north of the border.

But environmentalists and the California Coastal Commission say the plan promoted by U.S. Customs and Border Protection is too extreme.

Filling in part of canyon

Among other provisions, it would level the peaks lining Smugglers Gulch and fill part of the deep canyon with 2 million cubic yards of dirt in order to build a road across it. The Coastal Commission voted down the proposal a year ago, saying it would erode soil near the federally protected Tijuana Estuary that's home to marshes, California brown pelicans and rare plants and birds.

"We're going to destroy our environment in the name of fear," said Peter Douglas, the commission's executive director. "Frankly, there are ways that we can do both, protecting the environment and meeting the concerns of border control and homeland security."

Coastal Commission officials contended Customs and Border Protection didn't meet them halfway when they proposed alternatives, including switchback roads in the gulch.

A spokesman for Customs and Border Protection did not immediately respond to calls for comment Friday. But Hunter said environmentalists' demands were unreasonable. "You could run a thousand plans past some of these people. I don't think they understand the issues and I don't think they care," he said.

Rep. Bob Filner, D-Calif., whose district encompasses the border, disagreed.

"The waiving of all environmental rules for this is just criminal," Filner said. "It's just too extensive a trade-off for the limited security advantage."

More than 10 miles of the border between the Pacific Ocean and inland hills have already been fortified with fences, lights, motion sensors and beefed-up patrols. Apprehensions of illegal entrants fell 88 percent from 1994 to 2003.

The provision to finish off the border barriers is part of legislation introduced last week by House Judiciary Chairman James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., that would prevent illegal entrants from getting driver's licenses and

make it harder to get political asylum.

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