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Border fence protesters paddle down, then link hands across, the Rio Grande

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ROMA, Texas — Dozens of people paddled down the Rio Grande in kayaks and canoes Saturday to protest a border fence they say will do little to stop illegal immigration but will destroy the impoverished region's burgeoning bird-watching industry.

After their trip down the river, about 60 paddlers gathered with about 15 other people in an amphitheater, then held hands across the middle of the bridge to Miguel Aleman, Mexico. The protesters were mostly American but included the mayor of Miguel Aleman.

Protesters claimed the fence will harm endangered wildcats, cut farmers off from water and hurt cross-border commerce.

"It's a Stone Age answer to a 21st-century problem," said John Martin, a 64-year-old retired investment broker from Edinburg. "Why spend \$3.5 million a mile to tear out habitat we spent millions of dollars restoring?"

Nancy Brown, a spokeswoman for a U.S. Fish and Wildlife refuge that could see a fence cutting through it, said Roma was chosen because it is the epicenter of a fence debate raging in deep South Texas.

Bird watchers worldwide know it as a spot to glimpse four birds seen only in Starr and neighboring Zapata County — the white-collared seedeater, red-billed pigeon, Audubon's oriole and black-throated sparrow. Roma, a city of about 10,000, has built a new birding center just a block from the river to help boost tourism.

It's here that National Guard members were spotted in April clearing brush for what residents learned was to be the first leg of construction for a border fence in the Rio Grande Valley. Riverfront landowners said Border Patrol agents told them the fence would extend along the river 2 1/2 miles in both directions from the ends of international bridges, including the one to Miguel Aleman.

Angry local politicians rallied their federal representatives, who got assurances from Michael Chertoff, homeland security secretary, that only preliminary surveying was under way, and that they would be consulted before any barriers went up.

But early in May, local leaders intercepted a map of about 153 miles of Texas fencing they hadn't been consulted on.

Border Patrol spokesman Mike Friel said that construction this fiscal year would be in California, Arizona, and New Mexico, and that decisions had not been made on the construction or location of the Texas fence. Homeland Security continues to seek local input, he said.

"I think our message is that we want to gain effective control of the border and also facilitate legitimate travel and trade," he said. "Our commitment is to ensuring that we meet those twin goals."

Under a bill President Bush signed last year, 700 miles of fencing is slated for the U.S.-Mexican border, of which the Homeland Security Department has said will include at least 370 miles of physical fence supplemented by a "virtual" barrier of sensors, mobile towers with cameras, agents and other technology.

Homeland Security officials say the fence is needed in urban areas where smugglers and illegal immigrants can quickly fade into the surroundings.

Bush has since said he would veto a bill that required officials to solicit input from communities about fencing. White House officials said that the government had already conducted extensive outreach and that the mandate would impede the securing of the border.

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