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Extreme western stretch of border to be fortified

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SAN DIEGO - The Bush administration said Wednesday it will fortify the westernmost stretch of the U.S.-Mexican border, despite concerns the project will harm a refuge for endangered birds.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff signed an environmental waiver that expedites the Border Patrol's plans to fill in canyons and erect additional fencing along the final 3 1/2 miles of the border before it meets the Pacific Ocean.

Chertoff said the fortifications would help reduce illegal border crossings. But Border Patrol Chief David Aguilar told reporters the project was a broader effort to close gaps that terrorists and others could exploit.

"This is about border security," Aguilar said.

Construction of the fence seemed all but certain after the California Coastal Commission decided Wednesday not to challenge the waiver, said Peter Douglas, the panel's executive director.

Plans call for two additional fences running parallel to the 12-year-old, corrugated-steel barrier along the border. Sensors and cameras would track any movement.

Previous estimates have pegged the project at \$58 million, but Aguilar said the final cost had yet to be determined.

Concern over illegal immigration led Congress to pass legislation in 1996 requiring the Border Patrol to strengthen the westernmost 14-mile stretch of the border. Nine miles were fortified, but environmental concerns and lawsuits held up construction on the last 3 1/2 miles leading to the ocean and 1 1/2 miles farther east.

Earlier this year, Congress gave Chertoff the power to sign a broad environmental waiver to finish the job, citing fears that terrorists could slip through an unsecured border.

The coastal commission feared that filling a half-mile-long canyon known as "Smuggler's Gulch" with 2.1 million cubic yards of dirt would erode soil near a federally protected estuary that is a refuge for threatened and endangered birds.

But Congress had thwarted court challenges by eliminating judicial review of the project on anything but constitutional grounds, Douglas said.

"It's a sad day, and we'll have to live with this wall of shame for the rest of our lives," he said.

The Border Patrol said it would take measures to reduce environmental harm, including stair steps on the slopes to reduce erosion.

Mexico has also objected to the fencing.

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