

Bush signs bill to build 700-mile border fence; MEXICO, OTHER ALLIES PUSHED FOR VETO OF PLAN

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Body

President **Bush signed** a measure Thursday authorizing the construction of a **fence** along **700 miles** of the U.S.-**Mexico border**, an action that conflicts with his own stated vision of immigration reform but one championed by many Republicans facing re-election in November.

Speaking at a White House ceremony before a day of campaigning for GOP candidates in Iowa and Michigan, **Bush** said the barrier would help the United States plug the porous southwest **border**.

“Unfortunately, the United States has not been in complete control of its **borders** for decades and, therefore, illegal immigration has been on the rise,” **Bush** said.

While **Bush** portrayed the measure as a key step toward comprehensive immigration reform, the **fence bill** passed by the GOP-controlled Congress put him in a tight squeeze with international **allies** and his own immigration principles on one side and the electoral needs of his party on the other.

Boosting reform

Bush has said that immigration reform would only work if stepped up enforcement is accompanied by a guest worker program that would create a legal path for large numbers of low-skill workers to enter the United States. The president also has endorsed allowing the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the United States a chance at citizenship, saying such a humane vision of immigration is in keeping with the nation's history and traditions.

But that position was rejected by congressional Republicans, who advocated tougher enforcement to slow the flood of illegal immigration that is overwhelming many communities, particularly in the West and Southwest, and they passed a measure that did as much.

“Today marks another step forward in making America safer and in stemming the tide of illegal immigration,” House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., and Senate Majority Leader **Bill** Frist, R-Tenn., said in a statement. “The American people demand **border** security, and this Republican Congress and president are committed to achieving operational control of the **border** through an enforcement-first approach.”

Burning bridges?

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The government of Mexican President Vicente Fox made it clear Fox wanted the bill vetoed. A statement by Mexico, and signed by 27 other Organization of American States members Wednesday, expressed concern about the bill, calling it ``a unilateral measure that goes against the spirit of understanding that should characterize how shared problems between neighboring countries are handled and that affects cooperation in the hemisphere."

But such concerns were outweighed by the pleadings of congressional Republicans eager to back up their tough talk on border security with a legislative accomplishment.

House Majority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, hailed it ``a major victory in Republicans' efforts to make a real difference in securing our borders."

Appropriations lacking

Democrats dismissed it as pointless. Only a fraction of the billions needed to finance the fence has been appropriated, and much of the construction might be unfeasible. In swaths of Arizona, the fence would have to climb up steep, desert crags and plunge down deep ravines.

Without the border agents to patrol it, smugglers would blast holes in remote stretches, some critics have said. ``The bill the president signed today represents the worst in election year politics," said Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas. ``It is an empty gesture for the sole purpose of sending a false message about the security of our nation."

While the new law authorizes the construction of a 700-mile fence, it remains far from clear how much fencing will actually be built.

Department of Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke declined to say if the department is committed to building a 700-mile barrier. Instead, he cited DHS commitment to test by next year a \$67 million, 28-mile ``virtual fence" including physical walls, vehicle barriers and remote monitoring south of Tucson, Ariz.

Analysts, meanwhile, debate the effectiveness of a fence.

Since the United States began building a 66-mile barrier in San Diego in 1990, illegal immigration has been re-routed to more remote areas, with many immigrants now being funneled to the treacherous desert south of Arizona.

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