

Immigration detention's Alligator Alcatraz model spreads despite legal defeats

The rapid-deployment immigration detention model pioneered at Florida's "Alligator Alcatraz" in summer 2025 has spawned a network of similar facilities across multiple states, despite a federal court ordering the original facility's closure for environmental violations. This research reveals how state governments, emergency management contractors, and the Trump administration have attempted to replicate Florida's controversial approach of using tent-based detention centers in remote locations surrounded by natural barriers.

The original model faces swift legal defeat

Florida's flagship "Alligator Alcatraz" facility at Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport in the Everglades operated for less than two months before federal intervention. [\(Brennan Center for Justice +4\)](#) **Built in just 8 days using emergency powers in June 2025**, the tent-based facility housed up to 1,000 detainees [\(PBS\)](#) in what Attorney General James Uthmeier [\(Brennan Center for Justice\)](#) promoted as a natural prison surrounded by alligators and pythons. [\(Wikipedia +5\)](#) The facility's rapid construction bypassed all environmental reviews, leading U.S. District Judge Kathleen Williams to issue a preliminary injunction on August 21, 2025, ordering its closure within 60 days [\(ABC News\)](#) for violating the National Environmental Policy Act. [\(Wikipedia +3\)](#) The court found the state had paved **20 acres of protected wetlands** and installed infrastructure that threatened endangered Florida panthers while disrupting a \$20 billion Everglades restoration effort. [\(CNN +2\)](#)

Congressional visits in July 2025 documented severe conditions that became a template for human rights concerns at similar facilities. Representatives found 32 detainees per chain-link cage in sweltering heat, with maggot-infested food, overflowing toilets, and detainees shouting "libertad" for help. [\(Fox News +3\)](#) The ACLU successfully sued to restore attorney access after detainees were cut off from legal counsel for weeks, with some disappearing from ICE's online tracking system entirely. [\(Democracy Now!\)](#) [\(American Civil Liberties Union\)](#) Despite spending **\$450 million annually** to operate—at \$245 per detainee per day, [\(The Hill\)](#) [\(CNN\)](#) far above the federal average of \$187—the facility began releasing detainees in late August 2025 following the court order. [\(CNN +5\)](#)

Florida pivots to permanent prison infrastructure

Rather than abandoning the detention expansion model, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced the "Deportation Depot" at Baker Correctional Institution on August 14, 2025, just days before Alligator Alcatraz's court-ordered closure. [\(CNN\)](#) This repurposed state prison 43 miles west of Jacksonville offers 1,300 beds expandable to 2,000, with a setup cost of only \$6 million compared to hundreds of millions for the tent facility. [\(CNN +4\)](#) The shift from temporary tents to existing prison infrastructure

suggests Florida learned from the legal vulnerabilities of the Everglades model while maintaining the core concept of state-run immigration detention that bypasses federal oversight.

The political momentum behind these facilities remains strong despite legal setbacks. Trump, DeSantis, and DHS Secretary Kristi Noem toured Alligator Alcatraz on its July 1 opening, [\(Brennan Center for Justice\)](#) [\(CBS News\)](#) with Trump calling it a model for other states. [\(Fox News +4\)](#) Attorney General Uthmeier, who coined the "Alligator Alcatraz" name and promoted the facility's alligator perimeter in viral videos, [\(NPR +2\)](#) was held in civil contempt of court in June 2025 for defying federal immigration law but continues championing the detention expansion while under criminal investigation for alleged Medicaid settlement fraud. [\(Wikipedia\)](#) [\(Wikipedia\)](#)

Texas offers land but avoids direct state operation

Texas has positioned itself as the primary partner for federal detention expansion without directly operating state-run facilities like Florida. Land Commissioner Dawn Buckingham offered **1,402 acres of state-owned ranch land** in Starr County, 35 miles west of McAllen, to the Trump administration for building mass deportation facilities. Named the "Jocelyn Initiative" after a murdered 12-year-old, the remote Rio Grande Valley property could accommodate tent structures similar to Alligator Alcatraz while using the desert and river as natural barriers. [\(KSAT\)](#) [\(The Texas Tribune\)](#)

The closest Texas analog to Florida's model is the federal Fort Bliss facility in El Paso, where a tent complex houses 1,000 detainees [\(PBS\)](#) with plans to expand to 5,000 beds [\(ProPublica\)](#) by 2027. Built in the Chihuahuan Desert with summer temperatures exceeding 100°F, the **\$1.2 billion facility** explicitly draws comparisons to Alligator Alcatraz [\(PBS\)](#) in its use of temporary structures and harsh natural environment as deterrents. [\(The Texas Tribune\)](#) [\(ABC News\)](#) The contractor, Acquisition Logistics LLC, is a small Virginia company with no prior detention experience that previously never handled contracts over \$16 million, [\(ProPublica\)](#) [\(PBS\)](#) raising questions about the selection process similar to those surrounding Florida's contractors. [\(ABC News +2\)](#)

Texas's Operation Lone Star has spent over \$4 billion since 2021 on border security infrastructure including temporary detention facilities, though most actual detention remains federally operated. [\(Houston Chronicle\)](#) [\(Texas\)](#) Governor Greg Abbott committed **\$6.5 billion** for border security in the 2026-2027 budget, with state officials coordinating closely with federal deportation plans while avoiding the legal exposure of directly operating immigration detention that Florida experienced.

Arizona resists while other states embrace the model

Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs explicitly rejected replicating Florida's model, stating "Arizona will not be entering into the federal detention business like Florida has." [\(KTAR\)](#) However, her administration's July 2025 sale of the Marana Community Correctional Treatment Facility to Management and Training Corporation for \$15 million effectively enabled ICE expansion, as MTC operates five immigration

detention centers nationally and indicated potential ICE use to local officials. (Phoenix New Times)

(phoenixnewtimes) The remote Sonoran Desert location fits the natural barrier model perfectly, with extreme heat, dangerous wildlife, and isolation from legal services.

New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has taken the strongest stance against the detention expansion, planning a special legislative session to ban local governments from contracting with ICE.

(Yahoo!) (CalMatters) California faces federal pressure to convert shuttered state prisons despite Governor Newsom's opposition, with CoreCivic expanding the California City facility in Kern County's remote desert into the state's largest immigration detention center. (San Francisco Chronicle)

Meanwhile, **Indiana's "Speedway Slammer"** at Miami Correctional Facility and **Nebraska's "Cornhusker Clink"** explicitly follow Florida's model, offering 1,000 and 280 beds respectively at state facilities made available for federal immigration detention. (CNN +2) These states avoided Florida's environmental law problems by repurposing existing prisons rather than building in protected wetlands.

Contractor networks replicate across states

The business infrastructure behind these facilities reveals a tight network of emergency management companies leveraging political connections for massive contracts. **IRG Global Emergency Management**, headquartered in Conroe, Texas, registered in Florida on February 28, 2025—just months before receiving over \$6 million in Alligator Alcatraz contracts. The company donated \$10,000 to the Florida GOP on June 24, 2025, the same day it received its first \$1.1 million contract, (yahoo) following a pattern where its affiliated company ARS had previously donated \$250,000 to DeSantis PACs. (Gulf Coast News Now) (Yahoo!)

IRG's executives were linked to companies sued for inflating hurricane insurance claims, with former employees alleging they were used as "pawns in a plan to file inflated insurance claims in federally-declared disaster areas." (Yahoo!) (yahoo) The company shares executives and office addresses with ARS Global Emergency Management and Global Estimating Services, creating an opaque corporate structure that makes accountability difficult. (Yahoo!)

SLSCO Ltd of Galveston, owned by the Sullivan brothers who built **\$1.4 billion worth of Trump's first-term border wall**, served as primary construction contractor for Alligator Alcatraz. The company faced a 2020 federal lawsuit for allegedly allowing armed Mexican nationals without legal status to provide border wall security, (yahoo) and a 2024 New York City audit found it charged asylum seeker shelter rates 237% higher than competitors. (yahoo)

Deployed Resources, which holds a virtual monopoly on CBP tent facilities since 2016, (ProPublica +2) exemplifies the detention industry's evolution. Founded by a former convicted marijuana grower and a music festival logistics coordinator, the company pivoted to government work after a 2005 meeting

with FEMA at Bonnaroo. (ProPublica) (ProPublica) They've received over **\$4 billion in government contracts**, with founders purchasing multimillion-dollar beachside properties (ProPublica)

(The Texas Tribune) while their facilities faced criticism for billing the government for empty beds and inadequate sexual abuse prevention training. (ProPublica)

Environmental destruction becomes systematic challenge

The environmental violations that shut down Alligator Alcatraz represent a broader pattern across rapid-deployment facilities. Florida's facility destroyed 2,000 acres of Florida panther habitat, paved 800,000 square feet of wetlands without permits, and installed industrial lighting visible 20-30 miles away that drove wildlife from their habitats. (CNN +2) The Miccosukee Tribe successfully joined litigation after the facility restricted access to sacred lands used for hunting and gathering ceremonial plants.

(NBC News +6)

Federal judges consistently rule that emergency powers don't override environmental law. Judge Williams found that Florida and federal defendants "failed to consider alternative locations" and created "irreparable harm in the form of habitat loss and increased mortality to endangered species."

(Fox News +2) The ruling required removal of all generators, lighting, sewage systems, and **28,000 feet of barbed wire** within 60 days, (PBS) (CBS News) essentially dismantling the entire facility. (CNN +3)

These environmental challenges extend beyond Florida. Proposed facilities in Texas's Big Bend region threaten desert ecosystems, while Arizona's remote locations strain scarce water resources. The systematic bypassing of environmental reviews through emergency declarations has become a central legal vulnerability, with environmental groups achieving their most significant victories through the National Environmental Policy Act rather than immigration law challenges.

Human rights violations persist across facilities

Documentation from multiple facilities reveals consistent patterns of abuse that advocacy groups argue violate both constitutional rights and international human rights standards. **Human Rights Watch's July 2025 report** documented detainees shackled for prolonged periods without food or water, forced to sleep on concrete floors under 24-hour fluorescent lighting, and denied basic medical care including insulin for diabetics. Multiple deaths in custody, including Marie Ange Blaise who died after guards ignored her medical emergency for over 30 minutes, highlight systemic medical neglect.

(Human Rights Watch)

The ACLU has filed multiple class-action lawsuits achieving partial victories. Their litigation restored attorney access at Alligator Alcatraz after documenting that detainees were held incommunicado for weeks, with some disappearing from ICE's tracking systems entirely. (FOX 35 Orlando +2) Attorneys report being denied facility access, having virtual meetings mysteriously canceled, and finding clients

transferred between facilities without notice, effectively severing legal representation during critical proceedings. [Reason Magazine](#)

The remote locations central to the Alligator Alcatraz model exacerbate these violations by limiting oversight. Congressional delegations initially faced denial of access to facilities, requiring lawsuits to conduct oversight visits. [Time +2](#) When finally admitted, they found overcrowding so severe that detention cages contained "wall-to-wall humans," with multiple reports of worms in food and human waste on floors where toilets had overflowed. [Fox News +3](#)

Political dynamics ensure model's persistence

Despite legal defeats and documented abuses, the political coalition supporting rapid-deployment detention remains powerful. **Congress appropriated \$45 billion** for immigration detention expansion in 2025—a 311% increase in ICE's detention budget—[American Immigration Coun...](#) ensuring continued funding regardless of legal challenges. [American Immigration Council](#) [American Immigration Council](#) The model's architect, James Uthmeier, leveraged his role in creating Alligator Alcatraz to become Florida's youngest Attorney General since 1966, even while facing contempt of court charges and criminal investigation. [Wikipedia](#)

Former GEO Group lobbyist Pam Bondi's appointment as U.S. Attorney General creates a direct pipeline between private prison interests and federal policy. [NIJC](#) GEO Group's executive chairman George Zoley projects "\$800 million to \$1 billion in incremental annualized revenues" from detention expansion, [Brennan Center for Justice](#) [The Appeal](#) with the company securing a 15-year, \$1 billion contract for New Jersey's Delaney Hall facility in 2025. [Brennan Center for Justice +2](#)

The economic incentives align powerfully with political messaging. Emergency management contractors can deploy facilities in days rather than years, allowing politicians to claim immediate action on immigration. The **\$245 daily per-detainee cost**—far above efficient operations—creates lucrative opportunities for contractors who reciprocate with political donations, [CNN](#) establishing a self-reinforcing cycle that persists despite legal setbacks. [CNN](#) [Wikipedia](#)

Conclusion

The Alligator Alcatraz model represents a fundamental shift in American immigration detention toward state-operated, rapidly deployed facilities in remote locations that deliberately use harsh natural environments as security features. [CNN](#) While the original facility failed legally, its core concepts—emergency powers to bypass oversight, tent-based infrastructure for speed, remote locations to limit legal access, and state operation to complicate federal accountability—continue spreading across Republican-governed states. [themarshallproject](#) The model's persistence despite environmental destruction, human rights violations, and excessive costs demonstrates how political incentives and contractor profits can sustain policies that courts repeatedly find unlawful. As litigation continues and

new facilities open, the tension between rapid deportation infrastructure and legal constraints will likely define immigration enforcement battles through 2026 and beyond.