



Field Hearing of the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans
Most Reverend Raymundo J. Peña
Bishop of the Diocese of Brownsville
April 28, 2008

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Good Morning Mr. Chairman and good morning to all the members of the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans. I thank you for this opportunity to speak to you regarding this very important issue and I welcome you to our beautiful State of Texas and our home in the Rio Grande Valley. My name is Raymundo J. Peña and I am the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brownsville. Our diocese operates one hundred and seven parishes and missions for the approximately eight hundred thousand Catholics who live in the Valley and we also serve the greater population of nine hundred and forty thousand through a shrine and retreat center, twelve parochial schools, five centers for social services, three homes for the aged, and religious education programs at all parishes and missions.

As I begin my testimony, let me offer a few observations that will allow for a substantive and fruitful discussion on the proposed topic of this hearing, "Walls and Waivers: Expedited Construction of the Southern Border Wall and Collateral Impacts to Communities and the Environment."

This title sounds imposing and, indeed, the topic of building a wall between the United States and Mexico has generated a lot of controversy in our community. Passion and strong convictions can be good ingredients for an informative civic discourse, however, anger is no substitute for wisdom, attacks are no substitute for dialogue, and feeding fears will not help us find solutions to the challenges that lie before us.

As a man dedicated to pastoral ministry, let me remind everyone here that the issues before this Subcommittee should not be used for partisan advantage. We have to guard against policy disputes that encourage or excuse ethnic hostility or discrimination. We must continue to seriously discuss legitimate concerns regarding the protection of our borders, curbing the flow of unlawful immigration, the potential displacement of native workers, and the possibility of exploitation within guest worker programs. These issues are not to be ignored, exaggerated, dismissed, or used as political weapons. The Church calls for charity and justice at all times, and especially in a public forum such as this.

The "Wall" has been discussed very frequently and thoroughly in this part of Texas, because our community is a border community. For many Americans the emphasis is on the word "border" but for those families that have lived in this area for generations, the reality is that the community comes first and our community has existed long before the border was ever drawn. This Wall, built on US Soil, will not only move the US border inward from the Rio Grande River, but will also alienate people and businesses who live and work between the Wall and the border, in effect creating a zone where US citizens and businesses exist "south of the border." This is problematic not only for the movement of people and goods between the US area north and south of the wall, but also because it creates a new mentality of who is and who is not a US citizen.

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In addition to the existing human community, which has thrived in this land for hundreds of years, the Rio Grande Valley houses several wildlife refuges and parks that preserve God’s creation. Wildlife areas including the International Falcon Reservoir, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, Nature Conservancy’s Southmost Preserve and Texas Sabal Palm Sanctuary would be threatened by such a wall. These parks enhance family life in our community.

Therefore, let me humbly advise the Subcommittee that the word “expedite” should not be a part of this dialogue. For a great many people living in the Rio Grande Valley building a wall along the border would not mean protection from the outside world, but instead, the collateral impact of building a wall would mean building a barrier between families, friends, and businesses. The wall would mean physically living, on a daily basis, with a massive edifice that almost no one here wants. There is a great deal of confusion in our community about the location of the wall and which properties and communities would be directly impacted. I am very concerned about the wall’s proposed location and the possibility that it might be a barrier that may prevent us from fulfilling our pastoral mission in parts of this diocese. It is not clear to me if our historic church properties and missions might be impacted. It would be wrong to discuss this in terms of expediting construction before our community has had a chance to voice its opinion on the merits of why we oppose the wall.

We oppose the construction of the wall because one-dimensional solutions may be simple, but they are often illusions and can make things worse. No fence we can build will be long enough or high enough to wall out the human and economic forces that drive undocumented immigrants into our country. We oppose the wall because immigration policies that begin and end at our borders will not be successful. We oppose the wall because it poses a serious threat of increased flooding in our region in the event of a hurricane, which on this coast is not a possibility, but a reality. We oppose this wall because residents of the Valley—and visitors from across the country—stand to lose the opportunity to visit the vibrant wildlife areas unique to our Valley, places where all can discover and connect with God’s creation and with one another. I have, therefore, supported Valley Interfaith’s petition against the Border Wall and have invited parishes in the diocese to support it, as well. To date over 10,000 registered voters have signed this petition.

Instead of a wall, we need Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Instead of a wall, we need national policies that help overcome the pervasive poverty and deprivation, violence and oppression that push people to leave their own homes. We need policies that promote family unity, debt reduction, economic development, foreign aid and fair global trade. These are essential elements that the Church recommends for effective comprehensive immigration reform.

I should also add that a collateral consequence from Congress not passing any comprehensive immigration reform has been the flood of local and state proposals in Texas to deal with this federal issue. In our most recent session of the state legislature, more than sixty bills were introduced that attempted, among other things, to fund local law enforcement agencies to act as federal border agents, bar the undocumented from access to any public education or emergency healthcare, and deny citizenship to any child born in Texas to undocumented parents. Fortunately, nearly all of these punitive measures were defeated, last year. Our next legislative session is scheduled to begin in January and we are bracing for all these bills to be re-introduced.

Let me say again, that rather than debating the impacts of a wall, what we need is a different type of debate. We need a constructive discussion that neither diminishes our nation nor divides our communities, but instead achieves realistic, practical, and principled steps towards solving the challenges that face our nation.

Thank you again for your attention, I look forward to any questions that you might have for me at this time.

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