



July 29, 2026

The Honorable Markwayne Mullin
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20528

The Honorable Rodney S. Scott
Commissioner
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20229

Re: Immediate halt to border wall construction threatening ancient cottonwoods, wildlife and cultural resources in Lochiel, Arizona

Dear Secretary and Commissioner:

The Center for Biological Diversity calls on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to immediately halt border wall construction activities in the Lochiel area of Arizona's San Rafael Valley and protect the remaining ancient Fremont cottonwoods threatened by this project.

In recent days, DHS contractors cleared three historic Fremont cottonwoods estimated to be 200 to 250 years old to make way for construction of two parallel 30-foot-tall border walls. One protester was arrested while attempting to protect these trees and the migratory birds and other wildlife that depend on them. The destruction of these ancient trees represents an irreversible loss of ecological and cultural value in a landscape of extraordinary importance.

The San Rafael Valley and surrounding Sky Islands are among the most biologically rich landscapes in the world. This transboundary biodiversity hotspot supports jaguars, ocelots, black bears, pronghorn, Sonoran pronghorn, Mexican spotted owls, Sonoran tiger salamanders and countless migratory bird species. The valley serves as a critical wildlife corridor connecting mountain ranges, grasslands and watersheds between Arizona and Sonora, allowing wildlife to move across an increasingly fragmented landscape.

The ancient cottonwoods of Lochiel are an essential part of this living ecosystem. These trees provide critical habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife while also representing centuries of natural and cultural history along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The San Rafael

Valley is also a landscape of deep cultural significance, with archaeological resources and places of traditional importance that require careful protection and consultation with Tribes.

Before any additional construction proceeds, DHS and CBP should immediately consult with Tribes with ancestral and cultural connections to the San Rafael Valley regarding archaeological resources, cultural sites and places of traditional importance that may be affected by the project. DHS and CBP should also complete comprehensive biological and cultural resource surveys to identify sensitive resources and avoid further destruction.

The Center for Biological Diversity urges DHS and CBP to:

1. Immediately halt all border wall construction and vegetation clearing activities in the Lochiel area.
2. Immediately consult with Tribes with cultural and ancestral connections to the San Rafael Valley regarding archaeological sites, cultural resources and places of traditional importance that may be affected by the project.
3. Conduct comprehensive biological and cultural resource surveys before any additional disturbance occurs.
4. Protect and preserve the remaining ancient cottonwoods and associated wildlife habitat.
5. Ensure that future border infrastructure decisions account for the extraordinary biodiversity, ecological connectivity and cultural significance of the San Rafael Valley.

The ancient cottonwoods of Lochiel cannot be replaced once they are destroyed. DHS and CBP have an opportunity and an obligation to prevent further harm to this irreplaceable borderlands landscape.

We urge you to immediately suspend construction activities and take action to protect the ecological and cultural resources of the San Rafael Valley.

Sincerely,

Russ McSpadden
Southwest Conservation Advocate
Center for Biological Diversity