

Arizona business, government leaders fret over economic impact of potential border closure

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Washington – President Donald Trump repeated threats this week to deal with a surge of migrants by closing the U.S.- Mexico border, a move that has been called a potential “economic catastrophe” for Arizona.

The threats began late last week, as Customs and Border Protection said it had 12,000 immigrants in custody – double what it considers “crisis level” – and was on track to apprehend 100,000 for the month of March, the most for that month in a decade.

Trump blamed the surge on Mexico and the three Central American countries that many migrants are fleeing. He threatened to close the border and to cut off foreign aid to El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala unless they took steps to stem the migrants.

On Tuesday, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said Trump continues to look at closing the border, but there was no specific timeline on when a closure could occur, according to the Washington Post.

Those threats raised alarms from critics who said shutting the border would mean cutting off trade with the country’s third-largest trading partner, trade worth \$16.7 billion to Arizona last year.

“A closure of the U.S.-Mexico border would be an economic catastrophe,” said Glenn Hamer, president of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce, in a statement.

Even the president’s supporters conceded that closing the border would have an impact, but they said the situation at the border calls for drastic action.

Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Gilbert, in an interview Monday on Fox Business, said closing the border would “cause economic distress throughout Arizona and the rest of the country.” But he said Trump has “few options,” with Congress unwilling to fund a border wall and unable to pass immigration reform. For that reason, Biggs said he could support a temporary closure to “inspire Mexico to do what it needs to.”

Sen. Martha McSally, R-Arizona, who convened a roundtable Monday to discuss CBP’s release of immigrants, said afterward it is important “to keep the legitimate trade and travel and cross-border commerce happening at the ports of entry.” But she added something must be done at the border, and echoed Trump’s call for Mexico to do its part.

“It’s important for our economy, but Mexico needs to step up and address this issue, and the countries in Central America need to do their part as well,” she said.

Critics said a shutdown will not stop immigrants, but it will hit the economies of both countries. Santa Cruz County Sheriff Tony Estrada called shutting down ports of entry the “weirdest, most crazy thing I’ve ever heard.”

He said the “worst-case scenario” of a complete border closure would have an immediate impact.

“The people, the tourism, the relationship, international commerce, everything is going to be impacted only because the current administration doesn’t care,” Estrada said.

David Bier, immigration policy analyst for the Cato Institute, said the potential closing would “have a huge effect on the economies along the U.S.- Mexico border.” But he also said it would have political consequences for Trump.

Despite the president’s threats, Bier said he does not believe the border will be closed in the next few days.

“He’s reiterated it, he’s put a deadline on it, but I don’t think that the president is going to shut off all trade and travel with the third-largest trading partner of the United States,” he said. “This would impact probably at least 5 million jobs in the United States that are dependent on the trade.”

But Estrada is beginning to think anything’s possible.

“I thought that would have been the most ludicrous and ridiculous thing possible,” he said of the shutdown threat. “And yet, now that I hear the president talk about that, I say, ‘My God, it could be a possibility.’”