

The Seattle Times

Trump touts more than 100 miles of new border wall during State of Union

Camila DeChalus

February 5, 2020

President Donald Trump boasted during his State of the Union address that his administration has built more than 100 miles of barriers along the southwest border. The latest government data, however, shows that only one new mile of barrier has been constructed where none previously existed.

During his address Tuesday night to Congress, the president referred to ongoing construction of “a long, tall and very powerful wall” that echoed promises from his 2016 presidential campaign.

“We have now completed over 100 miles and have over 500 miles fully completed in a very short period of time. Early next year we will have substantially more than 500 miles completed,” Trump said.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, there are currently 655 miles of primary barriers along the southwest border. This includes approximately 300 miles of pedestrian fencing and 250 miles of vehicle barriers.

New border wall construction has accounted for a total of 105 miles under the Trump administration as of Jan. 31, according to the latest CBP data — and all but one of those miles has gone to replacing dilapidated, existing barriers.

And much of the construction along the border has been possible only because Trump used his executive authority to reallocate funds to free up money for his long-promised border wall.

Last February, following a partial government shutdown, the Trump administration declared a national emergency that allocated up to \$6.7 billion in previously appropriated funds from military projects and other government departments toward wall construction. The announcement came after Congress only set aside \$1.375 billion for fiscal 2019 to build border barriers. Democrats have long made it clear that they do not support building a wall and have fought the administration’s every step to receive funding for it.

For fiscal 2020, the Trump administration received the same funding for the border wall as it did in fiscal 2019, falling far short of its original \$5 billion request.

Trump appears to make building a wall along the southwest border another prominent campaign pledge this year, but experts say the president’s promise to build 500 miles “in a very short period of time” is unrealistic.

David J. Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute, said that much of the area where the administration wants to build new barriers is located on private land.

“The majority of the progress that’s been made has been on property that the Department (of Homeland Security) has already obtained,” he told CQ Roll Call on Wednesday. “So the idea that he can do far more than he’s been able to do on federal land, on privately owned land, just isn’t realistic.”

The Trump administration has tried to assert eminent domain to acquire private land from citizens to construct its border barriers, a strategy also used by previous administrations. Some advocacy groups have said that the Trump administration has resorted to intimidation tactics to coerce landowners into giving up their property.

Bier expressed concern those tactics will worsen as Trump locks his sights on getting reelected.

“I wouldn’t put it past this administration from using basically every tool that it can to accomplish this promise,” he said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they cut legal corners or jam through this border wall as fast as possible with minimal review.”