



Trump to campaign in Yuma next week as Dems hold virtual convention

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President Donald Trump will travel to Arizona on Tuesday in a political appearance timed to draw attention away from the Democratic National Convention, which is being held virtually.

Trump is scheduled to be in Yuma, the site of repeated visits by the president and other top administration officials to tout the border wall that has been a centerpiece of his political messaging.

This will be the Republican president's third trip to Arizona during the coronavirus pandemic; he was last here in June, with a photo opportunity at the border in Yuma, and a Phoenix campaign rally.

Trump will visit Wisconsin — a critical swing state — and Minnesota on Monday. Next Thursday, Trump plans to make a campaign appearance in Scranton, Pa., the birthplace of former Vice President Joe Biden, just prior to the Democratic nominee delivering his acceptance speech at the convention.

Trump's Arizona stump appearances will come just a week after Vice President Mike Pence traveled to Tucson and Mesa to campaign.

The Republican focus on Arizona shows the state's importance to Trump's re-election chances. In several recent polls, Biden has edged out Trump as the choice of voters here, with a lead of 4-7 percentage points.

"We know Donald Trump is worried about losing Arizona, and if he wants to understand why Arizona voters are backing Joe Biden, he should watch our convention," said Jessica Mejía, Biden's campaign director in the state.

Trump's visit in June was undertaken to mark the completion of 216 miles of border wall, well shy of the 450 miles he has pledged to have built by the end of this year.

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But experts noted that the pace of construction has picked up in recent years and that, with elections looming this fall, the administration has a powerful incentive to keep pressing ahead.

"The Trump administration is spending money on the wall at an unprecedented level," said Jessica Bolter, an associate policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute.

A report in June by Customs and Border Protection said that since Trump took office in 2017, \$15 billion has been budgeted for about 738 miles of wall along the southwest border.

Trump campaigned in 2016 on a pledge to build a wall along the 1,954-mile border with Mexico, a wall that he said at the time that Mexico would pay for.

But CBP said the \$15 billion budgeted so far for the wall has come from the Department of Homeland Security budget and from Defense Department funds for military construction and for counter-narcotics operations. Money was also allocated from the Treasury Forfeiture Fund. Most of that funding, \$9.9 billion, is from the Pentagon.

Almost all of the 216 miles built so far have been replacements for older, existing border barriers that were constructed under the Secure Fence Act of 2006, CBP said.

Alex Nowrasteh, an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, noted that the wall currently costs about \$20 million a mile, and he expects costs to continue rising as more and more miles are added. That does not include annual maintenance costs, which he estimates at about \$800,000 per mile per year.

Trump's June visit came at a time when apprehensions have fallen close to the lowest levels in his presidency. CBP apprehended 23,118 migrants at the border in May, up slightly from April but a far cry from the 144,116 apprehensions in May 2019. This May's numbers were among the lowest levels since this time in 2017.

The drop in apprehensions was not lost on Vicki Gaubeca, the director of the Southern Border Communities Coalition.

"You can tell that things are shifting because not only are immigration and apprehension numbers really, really low, but we're also seeing CBP and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents being deployed to monitor protests, which makes me think they obviously don't have anything to do now," she said.

Supporters of the wall say it's money well spent.

"This is the most important issue facing our nation. Our border must be secured," Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Prescott, said in a statement prior to Trump's previous trip. "Yuma is on the front lines of this defense and I am proud to have supported additional border security."

Also on that June trip, some 2,000 Trump supporters — most not wearing facemasks — packed into a Phoenix megachurch for a "Students for Trump" rally. Outside, police used flash-bang grenades, pepper balls and pepper spray to break up protest of about 200 people.