

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Big Bend National Park
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Big Bend National Park, Texas 79834

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Boquillas Crossing Visitor Contact Station Environmental Assessment

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Big Bend National Park
Texas

February 2011



How to Provide Comments on the Boquillas Crossing Project:

You may submit comments online at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/parkHome.cfm?parkID=29>. If you do not have access to a computer, you may send your comments directly to the park at:

Big Bend National Park
ATTN: Boquillas Crossing Visitor Contact Station EA
PO Box 129
Big Bend National Park, Texas 79834

Thank you for your interest and participation in planning for Big Bend National Park!

NEXT STEPS

February to March 2011

30-day public comment period

NPS finalizes project alternatives in response to public comments

May to June 2011

Environmental Assessment public review period (30 days)

Design for visitor contact station complete

NPS releases decision document for project

Summer 2011

Project construction begins

April 2012

Boquillas Crossing and visitor contact station open!

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is planning to re-open the Boquillas Crossing on the Rio Grande in Big Bend National Park. The project would include the construction by the National Park Service (NPS) of a facility which will meet DHS requirements for a Class B Port of Entry (POE) at this crossing between the U.S. and Mexico.

In addition to meeting DHS requirements for the POE, the proposed project will include a visitor contact station which will enhance opportunities for visitor understanding of the historical cross-border connections, travel, use of the area, and requirements for travel should the crossing to Boquillas re-open. The structure is intended to provide the facilities needed for a secure Class B POE for travel between the U.S. and Mexico, facilitate international cooperation in the management of natural areas of bi-national interest, and provide park visitors who wish to travel to or from Mexico through the POE with information about the area and travel requirements.

In order to implement the proposed project, an environmental review examining potential effects associated with the project will be conducted. For this project, an environmental assessment (EA) will be prepared. This planning effort includes compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which requires public participation and an analysis of environmental impacts of the proposed action. The purposes of this newsletter are to:

- Share information with you about the planning and compliance process for the project, and
- Obtain your thoughts and views on the proposal to re-open the border crossing at Boquillas.

Significance of Big Bend National Park

Just north of the Rio Grande River in Brewster County, Texas is Big Bend National Park. The 800,000-acre park was established “to preserve and protect a representative portion of the Chihuahuan Desert along the Rio Grande River for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.” The park is the largest protected area of Chihuahuan Desert in the U.S.

When combined with Maderas del Carmen, Cañon de Santa Elena, Ocampo Natural Protected Areas (all located in Mexico), and Texas’ Big Bend Ranch State Park and Black Gap Wildlife Management Area, the park contributes to one of the largest international protected areas in North America.

BOQUILLAS CROSSING - BIG BEND NP - PHOTO CREDIT: NPS



Project Background

The people of the desert region along the U.S.-Mexico border have long shared the benefits and hardships of life in this rugged, arid landscape. Shared experiences in ranching, farming, mining, and tourism have knit the small communities together in a shared history. Since Big Bend National Park was established in 1944, visitors and park staff crossed into Mexico via “informal” river crossings to eat, buy goods, and experience the villages near the border. Residents on the Mexican side of the border also used these crossings to trade handmade goods, buy food, and visit relatives living north of the border. Visitors could also be ferried across the Rio Grande in a small boat and ride a burro or horse up to Boquillas.

The Boquillas crossing remained in use until May 2002, when the DHS directed closure of all informal border crossings until appropriate security measures were implemented. As a result, the Boquillas crossing, in addition to other informal entrances in Big Bend National Park, was closed. Since the closure, there have been very few crossings.

With the closing of the crossing, opportunities for trade between the residents of Boquillas and vendors at Rio Grande Village have diminished dramatically. Currently, the closest POE is located more than a 100 mile one-way trip from Boquillas on the U.S side of the river. To reach this POE via Mexico requires hours of travel, including slow speeds on unpaved roads. As a result, there has been very little economic activity between the nations in this location.

Local residents have long lobbied for re-opening the crossing, which has also been a priority for the NPS. U.S. President Barak Obama and Mexican President Felipe Calderón have made the project a high priority between the nations. On January 6, 2011, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Commissioner, Alan Bersin, visited the Boquillas crossing site in support of the proposed project.

Mr. Bersin cited several reasons this is important to the U.S. and Mexico:

- In addition to our mission to protect America, CBP has an obligation to facilitate trade and travel with Mexico.
- The Boquillas POE will fill the void of a long stretch of border (approximately 290 miles) where there is currently no POE.
- The presence of a POE will not contribute to vulnerability of the border. CBP and NPS partnerships with Mexico will add to the cooperative environment that has been developed over the last several years. That cooperation provides for continued security and commerce for both nations.
- The reinstatement of legal day trips to Mexico from within the park will contribute to the security and welfare of visitors and will also increase travel to the area.

With the support of both the U.S. and Mexico, the proposed site for the POE is the historic location at the Boquillas crossing. The crossing would be a Class B (remote, automated) POE formally establishing a legal means of entry to the U.S. Remote technology would be used to maintain security and verify the identity of those entering with proper passports, visas, or crossing cards. The equipment and technology required by the DHS would be housed within the proposed NPS visitor contact station, and monitored by agents in other locations.

Construction of the visitor contact station is proposed to begin in summer 2011. Opening the POE is proposed for the end of April 2012. Motorized vehicles would not be allowed to cross the river at the proposed POE.

BOQUILLAS DEL CARMEN - FROM MADERAS DEL CARMEN IN MEXICO - PHOTO CREDIT: NPS





Project Objectives

Objectives are what must be achieved to a large degree for the action to be considered a success. All of the alternatives selected for detailed analysis must meet the project objectives to a large degree and resolve the purpose of and need for action. The following objectives were developed for this project:

- Provide the facilities needed for a secure and legal Class B Port of Entry for travel between the U.S. and Mexico;
- Facilitate international cooperation in the management of natural areas of bi-national interest;
- Enhance opportunities for visitor understanding of the historical cross border connections, travel, and use of the area, as well as current cross border requirements for travel; and
- Restore the historic connection between Boquillas del Carmen and Big Bend National Park.

Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT NEW OPPORTUNITIES WOULD RESULT FROM RE-OPENING THE CROSSING?

The ability to legally travel across the Rio Grande at Boquillas would expand visitor opportunities, and potentially increase travel to the area. Operation of the visitor contact station would provide educational opportunities and foster understanding and appreciation of the natural and human history of the region.

Businesses on both sides of the international boundary have been adversely affected by the closing. Re-opening the crossing would permit park visitors to enjoy local food and purchase traditional handicrafts. Boquillas residents would be able to purchase goods and services within the U.S. and visit friends and family north of the border.

WILL THE OPERATION OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT AFFECT NATIONAL SECURITY?

No. The remote technology proposed as part of the project would maintain security by verifying the identification of those entering the U.S. In addition, this section of the border has not experienced the high levels of illegal traffic found at other locations along the U.S.-Mexico border.