

A: Hi William, did you hear that Donald Trump declared a state of emergency over the situation at the US southern border with Mexico?

B: - No, Mary. Has the president come up with another brilliant idea about his wall? It was a big promise during the 2016 presidential campaign to stop the flow of Mexican immigration. Because, as far as I know he hasn't achieved very much in terms of construction.

A: True. Since Mr Trump entered the White House, although some of the already existing barriers have been replaced, work on extending the current barrier only began last year.

B: That's right. Before he took office, there were 654 miles of barrier along the southern border. That was 354 miles of barriers to stop people on foot and 300 miles of anti-vehicle fencing. And since Mr Trump took office only 57 miles of replacement barrier and 9 miles of new secondary barrier have been constructed - a total of 66 miles. No "new wall" has yet been completed.

A: I suppose the administration is facing a budget problem.

B: Not really. Overall, nearly \$10bn has been secured since January 2017 to construct approximately 509 miles of "new border wall system", according to US Customs and Border Protection.

A: Just imagine what could be done with so much money...

B: Actually, no-one really knows how much the whole project would cost once completed - if it ever is.

A: Why shouldn't it be?

B: For a host of reasons. First, the cost estimates vary from \$12bn to \$70bn. Remember that the previous 650 miles of fencing built under President George W Bush cost \$7bn.

A: What other obstacles are there?

B Well, top of the list - geography.

A: Geography?

B: Yes, geography is pretty unfriendly from California to the Gulf of Mexico. There are sand dunes, shifting sands and mountains, some of them reaching up to 3000 meters in Arizona and New Mexico. Then the wall would have to follow the twisty and winding path of the Rio Grande river. To me that's mission impossible.

A: I heard as well that the wall would disrupt a fragile ecosystem and prevent wild animal migrations.

B: Plus trying to get possession of the land could be a nightmare.

A: How so?

B: Well, to build the wall, the government needs permission to use the land it stands on. However, about 66% of the land along the US-Mexico border is either owned privately, by Native Americans or by individual states. In these cases, the government will need to coordinate mass voluntary sales of property or negotiate a right of way for the wall along large sections of land. Thousands of homeowners and landowners could be affected, including ranchers in Texas who rely on access to the Rio Grande and pastures for their livestock.

A: Then I assume trying to purchase this land could be a major challenge and, if people refuse to sell, the government would have to forcibly get hold of it. Welcome to the term "eminent domain".

B: What do you mean?

A: "Eminent domain" is the name of the system used by the American government to gain ownership of private property for public use, such as for highways and railroads, usually accompanied by compensation. It is compulsory purchase. But this all takes a lot of time, so the acquisition of a lot of the land could be tied up in legal arguments for years. American citizens don't give up their land without a fight - and high compensation.

B: Still, there's one bit of good news in this. It must be reassuring for the American public to know that, as President Trump has promised, the Mexicans are going to pay for the wall.

A: Do you really think so? So far, the President has taken money mostly from the defense budget and from an emergency budget, to get the project started. He claims a lot of it will come from increased trade with Mexico following his trade deals with them and the Canadians. But the Mexican government is equally firm; they are saying "pay for the wall yourself, Mr. Trump!"

Summary - Two friends exchange ideas about President Trump's decision to build a wall along the southern border of the USA to stem the tide of Mexican immigration. Several aspects of the project are being discussed including the price tag of such a herculean and somewhat unrealistic endeavor. They also consider the various difficulties it will meet with, among which are unfriendly geography, the fate of wild life, and the problem posed by the appropriation by the federal government of private or state lands.

Questions 1. Why do you think President Trump has made the wall such a major part of his program?

2. Do you think the wall could be effective?

3. What kinds of other walls have you heard of in other countries? Do they work?

4. Do you think the wall will ever really be built?