News
EarthBeat



Contractors are using explosives to carve out the side of the landmark Cristo Rey mountain that oversees two countries and three states. (Gaby Velasquez/Puente News Collaborative)

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SUNLAND PARK, New Mexico — May 14, 2026

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On a Saturday morning in March, high school students, mountain bikers and soldiers from a nearby Army base climbed the winding path up Mount Cristo Rey.

From the summit, they could see most of El Paso, the sprawling city that dominates a stretch of desert where New Mexico, Texas and the Mexican state of Chihuahua meet.

They paused to trace the line of the Rio Grande, where it divides Mexico and the United States, and then touched the smooth tiles lining the base of the Christ the King statue, a cherished monument that gives the mountain its name.

Two days later, on a Monday morning, explosions rattled the same site. Contractors were blasting the south side of Mount Cristo Rey to prepare the terrain for construction of the border wall President Donald Trump has long promised would run from San Diego in California to Brownsville in Texas.

Related: Catholic diocese fights Trump administration plan to seize pilgrimage site for border wall

After the explosions, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uploaded a video of the blasts to social media. One earlier post boasted the mountain was getting a "face lift" to "secure a historically challenging terrain."

The sarcasm didn't sit well with thousands of residents from both sides of the border, who looked forward to the annual Good Friday pilgrimage to the mountain summit. This year, they walked above an active construction zone.

Walls have long separated El Paso and Sunland Park, New Mexico, from the Mexican metropolis of Ciudad Juárez. But building a wall on the rugged slopes of Mount Cristo Rey was long considered impractical. Eventually, the mountain's slopes became the only significant gap without an imposing border fence in the binational metro area of more than 2.5 million people.



The Mount Cristo Rey monument sits atop a hill overlooking the U.S.-Mexico border wall near Sunland Park, N.M. (Gaby Velasquez/Puente News Collaborative)

The Good Friday pilgrimage

In recent years, Sunland Park and the area around Mount Cristo Rey saw high numbers of unauthorized crossings. Migrant deaths in the nearby desert soared. In lieu of a wall, Border Patrol agents blanketed the mountain and stationed themselves, along with surveillance equipment, on nearby roads.

Border crossings in the El Paso sector slowed during the final year of the Biden administration and have plummeted since Trump returned to office. The second Trump administration is intent on sealing every border gap.

SLSCO, a Texas company based in Galveston, has a $95 million contract to build a 1.3-mile wall on Mount Cristo Rey and two other barriers near El Paso. CBP waived environmental and historical preservation laws in June 2025, clearing the way for a border wall on the mountain. Over the objections of the local Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces, which owns most of the mountain, work began at the site in January.

Robert Ardovino, a business owner in Sunland Park, is no stranger to the traffic of Border Patrol vehicles and undocumented migrants crossing into New Mexico. But he was appalled to see the side of the mountain being shaved off.

"Electronics would have made more sense than destroying a whole mountain," Ardovino said on an afternoon in March. "But they're doing what they're doing."

He predicted when the Good Friday pilgrims ascended the mountain, many would be shaking their heads at the destruction.

"There is no accountability," he said. "And the damage will be irreparable."

"CBP has environmental monitors present during these activities to ensure construction best management practices are being followed and implemented by the construction contractor," an agency spokesperson said.

An environmental summary report, completed in lieu of an environmental impact assessment, is not available to the public, the spokesperson said.



The border wall stretches along a dirt road near Sunland Park, N.M. (Gaby Velasquez/Puente News Collaborative)

'Where faith transcends borders'

Mount Cristo Rey is where the land border between the U.S. and Mexico ends and the Rio Grande becomes the dividing line. This point, for centuries called *Paso del Norte* — the northern pass — has been a crossroads for Indigenous peoples, Spanish colonizers and later settlers traveling west on the early transcontinental railroads.

Once the railroad reached El Paso in 1881, the city grew quickly. A brick company opened on the flanks of Mount Cristo Rey, and a quarry was carved into the mountainside. Later, a copper smelter rose in its shadow. Mexican American workers lived nearby in a company town called Smeltertown.

A priest at Smeltertown's Catholic church first proposed building a statue on the mountaintop. The 29-foot limestone statue of Christ was dedicated in 1939. The

mountain, previously known as Cerro de los Muleros, or Mule Driver's Mountain, was renamed Mount Cristo Rey.

Smeltertown was demolished in the 1970s. But descendants of several families who lived there still volunteer with the Mount Cristo Rey Restoration Committee, which maintains the trail and monument. They keep a watchful eye on the thousands of people, the religious and the secular, who join the Good Friday walk.

During the first Trump administration, in 2019, a group called We Build the Wall, that included Steve Bannon, tapped private donations to build a half-mile wall on the eastern side of Mount Cristo Rey. Fisher Sand and Gravel, which has received billions of dollars in border wall construction contracts under the Trump administration, built this section of wall on private property land. CBP cut a dirt road across the south side of the mountain.

Bannon later pleaded guilty to defrauding donors. Lights illuminating the wall, which separates Mexico from the United States and El Paso from New Mexico, were turned off when the builders' bank accounts were frozen.

Border wall construction largely stopped during the Biden administration. But once Trump returned to office, Mount Cristo Rey became a priority.

Then-Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem waived more than two dozen laws on June 3 to expedite construction of the wall across the mountain. The REAL ID Act of 2005 granted DHS the authority to "waive all legal requirements" necessary to expedite construction of border barriers. Among the laws waived were the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act.

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CBP announced plans for a 30-foot-high barrier that would run along the south side of the mountain and loom over the Anapra neighborhood in Ciudad Juárez. Agency plans state the wall will consist of steel bollards spaced four inches apart. It will require drainage gates and access roads.

Funding for CBP's El Paso Anapra 16-4 Wall Project, which includes Mount Cristo Rey, dates back to DHS 2020 border wall appropriations. Since then, the agency has received 224 written statements about the proposal. According to the summary, 211

comments opposed the wall.

Notably, the Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces urged the agency to exclude Mount Cristo Rey from its barrier plans. In its comments, the diocese referred to the mountain as a place "where faith transcends borders."

"A grant of entry onto land [the diocese] owns for CBP purposes, whether temporary or permanent, would deter those pilgrims and migrants from exercising their religion as they have done for almost one hundred years," wrote the diocese's general counsel, Kathryn Brack Morrow. "A place of hope, faith, and communion would become a place of fear, exclusion and division."

Morrow wrote that the Las Cruces Diocese had received multiple requests for access to its property from the Department of Justice, which were denied.

The trail to the summit has not been disturbed by construction. But last year, the area along the border in Sunland Park and at Mount Cristo Rey was designated a National Defense Area, part of the U.S. Army's Fort Huachuca. People who enter a National Defense Area can be charged with trespassing.

Contractors are blasting the mountain along a 60-mile strip of federal property known as the Roosevelt Reservation. The City of Sunland Park also owns property on the mountain. A city spokesperson said Sunland Park has no jurisdiction over the area where construction is occurring.

The construction company JOBE also owns property on the mountain and declined to comment.



The new 1.3-mile barrier is part of a new $95 million project to be built in the El Paso region. (Gaby Velasquez/Puente News Collaborative)

A 'moonscape?' or a 'treasure?'

To the untrained eye, Mount Cristo Rey, like many Chihuahuan Desert locales, can appear desolate. A local CBP spokesperson compared it to a "moonscape" in a local news interview. "It's just rock and sand."

But for geologists like Eric Kappus, Mount Cristo Rey is a "treasure."

Kappus discovered a series of dinosaur footprints at Mount Cristo Rey in 2002 while he was a graduate student at the University of Texas at El Paso. The prints were formed between 80 and 100 million years ago when Iguanodons and theropods plodded through mud on the edge of what was then a vast sea.

Kappus said he spent thousands of hours exploring Mount Cristo Rey, looking for fossils and prints. After working as an exploratory geologist and teaching across the

country, he still considers it one of the premier sites anywhere for geology education.

"I could teach 75 to 80 percent of an introductory geology class in the field at Mount Cristo Rey," he said. "It's like a giant chalkboard."

The prints, preserved in sandstone, were exposed during excavation for the brick yard. The site was later donated to the non-profit INSIGHTS El Paso Science Center.

The dinosaur tracks site is not threatened by border wall construction.

William Lukefahr, an INSIGHTS tour guide, led a group down a rocky trail to the dinosaur tracks on a warm March morning.

He slowed down to look for plants and animals. He pointed out a Black-spined prickly pear cactus and a Mormon Tea shrub. Then he spotted a spider web encasing a cocoon-like structure made of debris — the home of a desert shrub spider.

"This mountain is very unique," he said. "But there hasn't been a lot of scientific research done here."

Other creatures commonly seen on Mount Cristo Rey include coyotes, canyon wrens and the greater earless lizard. Scruffy sotol and creosote shrubs dot the mountainside. Lukefahr explained that Mount Cristo Rey creates a corridor connecting the mountains in Juárez with those on the western and northern flanks of El Paso.

In their public comments to CBP, more than 80 people expressed concern for Mount Cristo Rey's prized environment. The agency's summary statement, in response, explained that a biological survey yielded no federally listed threatened or endangered species. The survey deemed that the habitat has a "low to moderate" suitability for wildlife.

"CBP has also determined there is minimal impact to vegetation and behavioral patterns of wildlife since the project area is flanked by existing barrier and an active patrol road," the agency wrote.

Ardovino, the local business owner, said that wildlife activity in Sunland Park diminished after Border Patrol was "unleashed" to drive across the desert and carve new roads.

Years ago, he said, there were 18 pairs of burrowing owls, a diminutive variety, on his property. That was until Border Patrol vehicles repeatedly disrupted their habitat.

"They're gone now," he said. "Concern for the environment is last on [the CBP] list."

Myles Traphagen coordinates the borderlands project of the Wildlands Network, a non-profit advocacy group. He said building the border wall will counteract federal efforts to foster endangered species, including the Mexican gray wolf.

U.S. and Mexican government biologists collaborate on wolf reintroduction, with pups from New Mexico transported to Northern Mexico to grow the population and increase genetic diversity.

"The border wall is quite disrespectful to a lot of work that's been undertaken by numerous government agencies," he said.

In 2017, Traphagen tracked the movements of a Mexican gray wolf outfitted with a GPS collar. The wolf traveled north from Chihuahua into New Mexico, then followed the Rio Grande to Mount Cristo Rey, where it crossed back into Mexico.

He said the border wall will close off this wildlife crossing point.



The border wall construction site is seen across from the Mexican neighborhood of Anapra on March 24, 2026. (Gaby Velasquez/Puente News Collaborative)

Closing open lands

Ardovino owns property less than a half mile from the blast site. He said his interactions with local Border Patrol agents have always been respectful, although he was not notified before the blasting began. The boom of an unexpected explosion signaled that construction was underway.

The neighborhood of Anapra in Juárez is just feet away from the blast site. Warning signs were posted in the neighborhood in January.

Morrow, the attorney for the Diocese, said as of the end of March she had not yet received notification from federal agencies of the blasting. Neither had Ruben Escandon Jr., spokesperson for the Mount Cristo Rey Restoration Committee. "Hopefully," blasting would not occur during the Good Friday walk, he said.

The CBP spokesperson said landowners would be notified, but that there are no landowners in the blast zone.

The Wildlands Network's Traphagen said that contractors at Mount Cristo Rey are defying common blasting protocols. Blast impact goes well beyond the thin strip of land where construction is underway, he said, and nearby residents and landowners should be notified for safety.

Construction activities as of late March were so far limited to the government's Roosevelt Reservation. But it is unlikely the wall can be built without access to the Las Cruces Diocese's property on the mountain. The diocese's attorney was adamant the church will not sell.

The CBP spokesperson said that if the agency is unable to purchase property for border wall construction through voluntary sales, the Department of Justice can use eminent domain.

In public comments, the diocese attorney said attempts to seize the land would violate religious freedom and the right to worship, protected by the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

For now, the Las Cruces Diocese is holding on to its sacred space. On Good Friday, thousands of people were expected to climb Mount Cristo Rey, as they have every year going back almost a century.

But blast by blast, border wall construction is coming for Mount Cristo Rey.

Martha Pskowski covers climate change and the environment in Texas for Inside Climate News. Gaby Velasquez is a photojournalist at the El Paso Times covering stories across the borderland. An El Paso native, she focuses on capturing the people and culture of the region.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.