



## Office of the President

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3100 • FAX 202-541-3166

Most Reverend William S. Skylstad, D.D.  
Bishop of Spokane

October 10, 2006

Honorable George W. Bush  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to ask that you veto H.R. 6061, the Secure Fence Act of 2006. As you know, H.R. 6061 would authorize the construction of up to 700 miles of fencing and barriers along our southern border with Mexico, among other provisions.

To be clear, the U.S. Catholic bishops are supportive of efforts to enforce immigration law and secure our borders, so long as the mechanisms and strategies applied toward this end protect human dignity and protect human life.

However, we are opposed to this legislation because we believe it could lead to the deaths of migrants attempting to enter the United States and increased smuggling-related violence along our border. We also believe it would send the wrong signal to our peaceful neighbor to the south, Mexico, as well as the international community. Finally, we do not believe it will solve the problem of illegal immigration faced by our nation.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently found that migrant deaths have doubled since 1995, about the time that the government initiated a series of border enforcement initiatives designed to stem illegal entries at ports-of-entry and other traditional crossing routes. Since that time, close to 3,000 migrants have died in remote portions of the southwest region of the country.

In our estimation, the erection of a border fence would force migrants, desperate to find employment to support their families, to seek alternative and more dangerous ways to enter the country, contributing to an increase in deaths, including among women and children. It also would drive migrants to depend upon unscrupulous smugglers, who would exploit them and, in some cases, place them in dangerous situations which may cause them harm.

As you know, Mr. President, the U.S. Catholic bishops believe that the defense of human life at all stages is of utmost importance and priority.

Honorable George W. Bush  
October 10, 2006  
Page Two

Another likely result of a border fence is an increase, not decrease, in smuggling-related violence, as smuggling networks may attempt to devise more elaborate and, in some cases, more confrontational schemes to smuggle persons into the country. Increased competition among smuggling gangs could lead to more violence in border communities. As Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff recently stated, violence against Border Patrol agents increased over 100 percent in 2005.

We also feel strongly that the erection of a 700-mile border fence would send a signal to Mexico and other countries in the hemisphere that the United States is not willing to work cooperatively to address the problem of illegal immigration. It could harm our relations with these countries and inhibit bilateral progress on mutual interests. As the world's greatest democracy and lone superpower, our nation should be able to address the issue of illegal immigration without resorting to the construction of fences and barriers.

Finally, Mr. President, we do not believe that a border fence will solve the immigration crisis in our nation. As you may know, close to one-half of all persons residing without documentation enter the country legally and overstay their visas. Moreover, as the Catholic Church is a universal organization which witnesses the economic conditions in sending countries such as Mexico, we do not believe that a fence will deter persons desperate to escape poverty from seeking employment in our country. From this universal perspective, we strongly feel that the development of just global economic and trade policies designed to help create living wage jobs in countries of origin would permit persons to remain home and support themselves and their families.

Mr. President, the U.S. Catholic bishops have appreciated your leadership on immigration and your support of comprehensive immigration reform. It is our view that the best way to secure our border is through the enactment of a comprehensive immigration reform measure, not by the construction of a border fence.

We hope that you will agree with this assessment and veto H.R. 6061, the Secure Fence Act of 2006.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "William L. Skylstad". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

Most Reverend William Skylstad  
Bishop of Spokane  
President, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops