

A Conspiracy to Murder Mariscal Mountain in Big Bend?

Will Customs and Border Patrol follow through on its plans?



GLENN W. SMITH

JUL 29, 2026



10

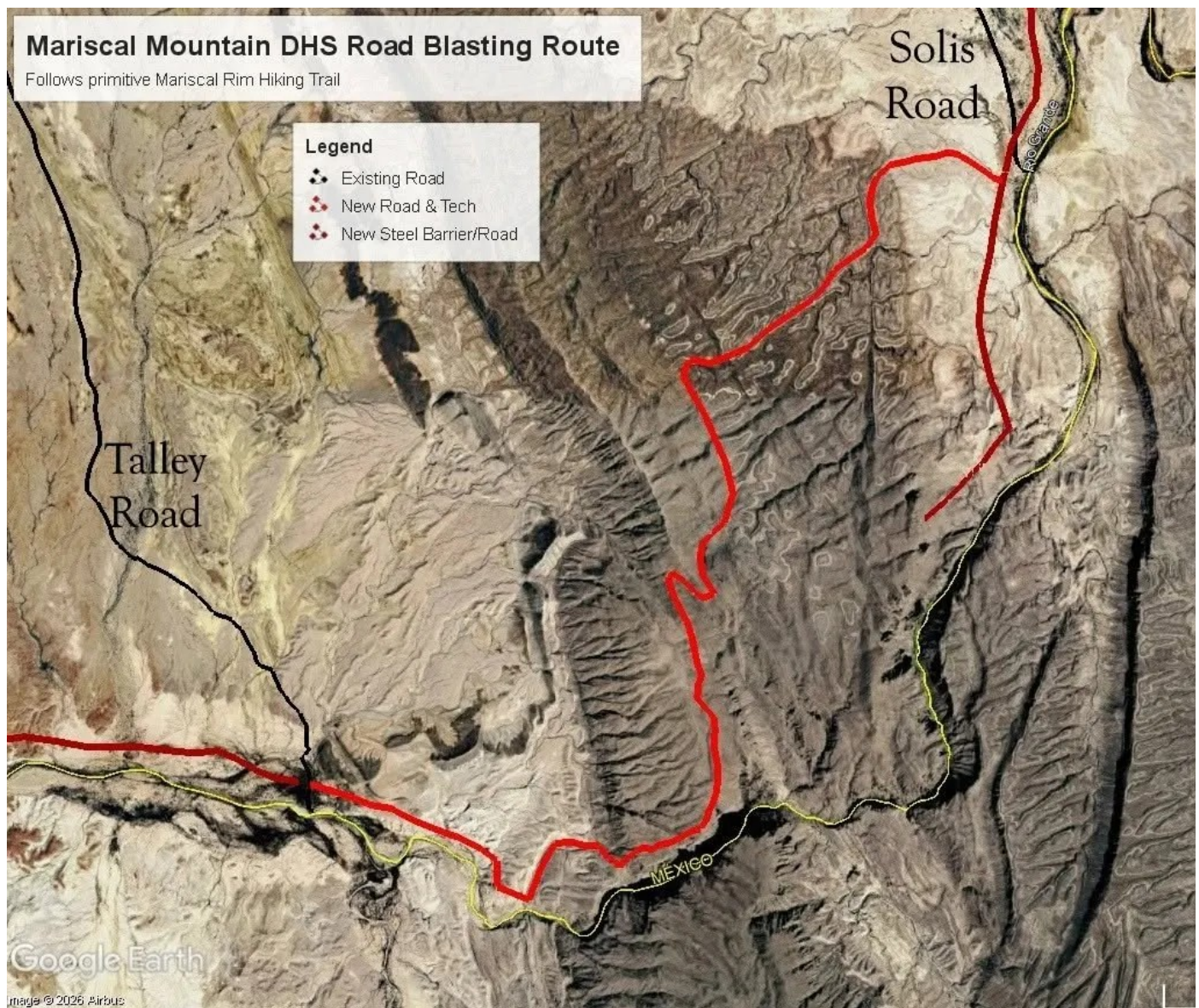


3



1

Sh



CBP's road map over Mariscal Mountain

When I saw on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's preposterously named "Smart Wall" map that the route of a new and unnecessary patrol road across the park will go up and over Mariscal Mountain, my eyes widened in fear and outrage. Was CBP about to blast the mountain into Mariscal Canyon and the Rio Grande? There reports it is reconsidering, but there is reason to be suspicious.

I am not a geologist. But I love the views of Big Bend National Park's geology and I have been able to understand it a little over decades of visiting the park. I'm also familiar with some of the more popular Big Bend guide books, like William MacLeod's *Big Bend Vistas: A Geological Exploration of the Big Bend*.

The CBP plan to dynamite Mariscal Mountain with its surveyors already in the park led me to research the consequences with urgency. I've given this essay its rather alarmist title because the research is really detective work into the likely consequences of a crime. If the federal government uses dynamite to turn a rugged hiking trail into a wide patrol road, where would the spoils go, the tons of rock blasted from the mountain that looms over the river below?

My research didn't require Columbo. Anyone could do it, including the folks at CBP who dreamed up the nightmare road, probably from a desk in Washington, D.C. I'm publishing this account in hopes that someone in the federal chain of command will take a few minutes to do the research.

I had an old copy of MacLeod's visitor's guidebook that I purchased at the park's visitor center years ago. It seemed like a good place to start. MacLeod mentioned that Mariscal and San Vicente mountains are *anticlines* straddling the Rio Grande, and that "strata have been elevated 2,500 feet by the Mariscal Mountain anticline. I didn't know what an anticline was, so I googled it.

I found a description at a university teaching page from Radford University in Virginia. It defines anticline in a sentence any schoolchild could understand: anticlines are folds in which each half dips away from the crest, looking something

like the letter the letter A or an upturned V. Rock layers that were laid down flat on sea floor get squeezed from the sides until they bow upward, the way a rug wrinkles when you push it against a wall. Mariscal Mountain is one long A. The hard limestone at the top of the anticline is the ridge crest. The hiking trail runs along that crest.

Then I searched for what is the weakest part of the fold. Everywhere I looked said the same thing: The crest. Try it with one “U” of a paper clip. Flex it and it fails at the bend, not along the straight parts. The line the trail follows, the line CBP wants the road to follow, runs right where the folding of the anticline has already cracked the rock most.

MacLeod’s sources sent me to a survey called Geology of Big Bend National Park, Bureau of Economic Geology Publication 6711, by Ross Maxwell and his colleagues. Maxwell was the park’s first superintendent. There’s a wonderful scenic road named after him. The whole book is free to download at archive.org/details/geologyofbigbend00maxw. The section on Mariscal Mountain runs about two pages: 287 and 288. It calls the mountain “a narrow asymmetric anticlinal ridge modified by faults.” By now I knew what anticlinal meant. The rest of the sentence took more looking up.

The Radford geology site taught me that a fault is not merely a fracture. It is a fracture along which movement has already occurred. A crack is a weakness; a fault is a weakness with a track record, a surface where the mountain has already demonstrated that it will slip when pushed. Maxwell writes that several faults are found on Mariscal Mountain. A thrust fault, formed when compression forces one slab to ride up over another, cuts the west side of the mountain, where the strata stand “nearly vertical, even overturned, highly brecciated in part.” He records several other normal faults, which are caused when rock is pulled apart until one slab slides downward. Reading Maxwell, I understand that Mariscal was broken. Twice. Once when it was squeezed and a second time when it was pulled apart millions of years later. The proposed road crosses the scars of those failures.

Maxwell used the word *brecciated* so I looked it up in my downloaded copy of *A Dictionary of Geology and Earth Sciences*. “‘Breccia’ literally means ‘rubble,’” the dictionary said. It is broken rock fragments cemented together. So part of the mountain is not solid rock. What happens when rubble is dynamited? I’ll leave that question with you.

He mentions, almost in passing, that the abandoned Mariscal mercury mine sits at the crest of the mountain’s fold near its northern end. At the crest. Where the road arrives on top. That stretch is honeycombed with century-old shafts mine shafts full of bat guano and quicksilver. Blasting above old mine voids is its own category of bad idea. I suppose it is possible that CBP is thinking they can somehow capture all the dynamited rock and store it in the abandoned mine. The mine shafts are far too small. There’s no room in the mountain to put the mountain.

All the evidence I collected said an effort to build a patrol road over and across Mariscal Mountain could well destroy more than the mountain. It could take out Mariscal Canyon and fill up the Rio Grande. The detective work was easy. Maybe CBP has already done it and that’s why there are reports the plan has been dropped. But CBP has been anything but straightforward in its statements about its plans for Big Bend.



10 Likes · 1 Restack

Discussion about this post

Comments

Restacks



Write a comment...



Billy Boyar  Jul 29

 Liked by Glenn W. Smith

I pray that those in power read this clear and insightful warning.

 LIKE (4)  REPLY



Aurora Garcia  Jul 29

That "smart wall" idea is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Thanks for the geology report Glenn, this idea is strictly policial, and totally anti-environment.

 LIKE (3)  REPLY



1 reply

1 more comment...