President Trump is preparing to divert an additional $7.2 billion in Pentagon funding for border wall construction this year, five times what Congress authorized him to spend on the project in the 2020 budget, according to internal planning figures obtained by The Washington Post.

The Pentagon funds would be extracted, for the second year in a row, from military construction projects and counternarcotics funding. According to the plans, the funding would give the government enough money to complete about 885 miles of new fencing by spring 2022, far more than the 509 miles the administration has slated for the U.S. border with Mexico.

Trump took $2.5 billion from military counterdrug programs for border barrier construction in 2019, but this year his administration is planning to take significantly more — $3.5 billion. Trump administration officials also are planning to take $3.7 billion in military construction funding, slightly more than the $3.6 billion diverted in 2019.

The move would bring the total amount of federal funds allocated to border fencing to $18.4 billion under Trump, who made the border barrier a priority during his campaign for the presidency in 2016. He also pledged to make Mexico pay for the barrier, delighting crowds at his rallies.
The Trump administration has completed 101 miles of new barriers so far, according to the latest figures, far less than the 450 miles the president has promised to erect by the end of the year. But construction along the border — largely on land the federal government already owns — has been continuing even as legal challenges have aimed to disrupt it.

**Smugglers are sawing through new sections of Trump’s border wall**

A federal-district court in El Paso ruled last month that the White House broke the law when it commandeered funds for the border wall that had been authorized by Congress for another purpose. The court froze $3.6 billion the administration budgeted for new barriers.

But the Trump administration appealed that ruling, and last week the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit, in New Orleans, lifted the injunction, saying work could proceed while legal challenges to the government are pending. The president and his administration viewed that ruling as additional encouragement to take the money again this year, according to administration officials familiar with the plans.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment Monday, and a Pentagon spokesman declined to comment. Bollard fencing marks the U.S.-Mexico border near Santa Teresa, N.M. (Paul Ratje/AFP/Getty Images)

Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, a senior White House adviser whom the president had placed in charge of the border wall project, had discussions last summer with top military officials about once more siphoning money from the Pentagon budget to construct the barriers. But those plans were on hold because of the legal challenges to the maneuver.

Several dozen Pentagon construction projects were delayed or suspended as a result of last year’s reprogramming of $3.6 billion, including road repairs, a waste treatment plant and school construction projects on military bases. It’s unclear if those projects will be delayed again, or if a different set of repairs and improvements could be postponed.

‘Take the land’: President Trump wants a border wall. He wants it black. And he wants it by Election Day.

The White House asked Congress for $5 billion for 2020 border barrier construction, and Trump’s demand led to the 35-day government shutdown a year ago. The shutdown ended with Democrats agreeing to provide just $1.4 billion in taxpayer funding and the White House turning to military budgets to obtain billions more.
Congress authorized nearly $700 billion in defense spending for 2020, a slight increase over last year’s levels.

The federal appeals court in New Orleans ruled 2 to 1 last week that the plaintiffs suing the Trump administration to block the use of the military funds — El Paso County, Tex., and the Border Network for Human Rights, an activist group — probably lacked the legal standing to make the challenge.
Panels of levee border wall are seen at a construction site along the U.S.-Mexico border in Donna, Tex. (Eric Gay/Associated Press)

The decision came six months after the U.S. Supreme Court issued a similar ruling lifting an injunction from a federal court judge in California that temporarily blocked the administration’s first attempt to reprogram military funds.

The 5th Circuit panel said the administration would be entitled to the same relief granted by the Supreme Court in that decision.

Stephanie Grisham, the White House press secretary, celebrated the court’s ruling in a statement, saying it had “lifted an illegitimate nationwide injunction” and “in doing so has allowed vital border wall construction to move forward using military construction funds.”

“This is a victory for the rule of law,” Grisham’s statement said. “We are committed to keeping our borders secure, and we will finish the wall.”

Homeland security officials have repeatedly moved the goal posts to scale back Trump’s ambitious construction targets, bringing criticism that they have not worked fast enough to deliver on the president’s signature promise.

During an event at the border in Yuma, Ariz., last week marking the completion of the 100th mile of barrier, Chad F. Wolf, acting homeland security secretary, said the administration has not fallen behind.

“I can tell you that we remain confident that we are on track to 400, 450 miles that are either completed or under construction by the end of 2020,” Wolf told reporters. It was the first time an administration official had counted barriers “under construction” toward the president’s pledge to complete 450 miles by Election Day.