

U.S. town opposes "Big Brother" Mexico border fence

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Reuters

By Tim Gaynor

ARIVACA, Arizona (Reuters) - A pilot project to place a high-tech network of surveillance towers along a stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border has met boisterous opposition in this Arizona town, where some residents call it "Big Brother."

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency is installing a network of nine towers with ground radar and night vision cameras to monitor a 28-mile (45-km) stretch of border near Arivaca, southwest of Tucson.

It is the first trial for the communications and technology arm of the government's Secure Border Initiative announced in 2005. Dubbed "SBInet," authorities say it will be extended across some 6,000 miles of the Mexican and Canadian borders in segments in coming years.

Residents of this remote, high desert ranching town of 1,500 people have packed four public meetings in recent weeks to oppose the project, which is due to go live at the end of next month.

"It's like Big Brother. It will place the whole town under surveillance," community activist C Hues told Reuters as residents gathered for a meeting late on Tuesday with CBP and Border Patrol representatives.

"The government will be able to watch and record every movement we make, 24 hours a day. It will be like living in a prison yard," she added.

Residents of the community are particularly concerned about one 98-foot-(30-meter-)tall tower topped with cameras and radar that will be placed just south of the town, which lies about 12 miles from the border.

"Why are they doing it here and not at the border? It's horrifying, it makes no sense," said Melissa Murray, a gallery owner from nearby Tubac.

Last year, about 1.1 million people were arrested crossing the border illegally from Mexico, more than a third of them through the heavily trafficked desert corridor south of Tucson, Arizona.

The Border Patrol said the system, which is being built by aerospace giant Boeing under a contract estimated at some \$2 billion, is a necessary step to close the border to illegal entrants and allow agents to promptly identify and capture illegal immigrants and drug smugglers.

Information captured by the towers -- including live images giving GPS locations of any intruders -- will be streamed live via satellite from command centers in Tucson and Sells to Border Patrol agents with laptops patrolling nearby.

Eventually it will be integrated into a wider network, including a fleet of Predator B unmanned surveillance drones.

"We need to have eyes on what's happening here," said Tucson sector Border Patrol spokesman Jesus Rodriguez. "We are not placing the town under surveillance, but we will be watching whatever is walking north to the town," he added.

Some ranchers around the former gold and silver mining community favor the project, which they say is needed to stem the flow of illegal immigrants, who they said cut cattle fences and dump trash.

Some local residents predicted that the technology would meet with opposition in other rural areas as it is rolled out along the rest of the state's border with Mexico by the end of 2008.

"It's not just Arivaca," high school teacher Luke Brannen said. "It's going to affect a lot of people in other communities in the future. They're next."