

Border fence not yet 'virtual'

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A "virtual fence" of high-tech sensors, cameras and other equipment along the busiest stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border is still being tested — three months after it was set to debut.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff — who last year touted the \$67 million program aimed at better detecting illegal aliens, drug smugglers and terrorists — said he will withhold further payment to the contractor until the pilot project is successful. About \$15 million of the \$20 million cost for the first 28 miles — known as "Project 28" — has been paid to Boeing Integrated Defense Systems.

"The systems individually work and they integrate with each other, but they have failed to integrate into a common operational procedure," Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke said. "The department is not going to take delivery of the system until it is fully operational."

Mr. Knocke said Boeing has brought new people to work on the network and the necessary testing is expected to be conducted and completed soon.

The first phase of the virtual-fence project includes nine 98-foot towers near Sasabe, Ariz., equipped with radar, sensors and state-of-the-art cameras, designed to coordinate sensor and camera sightings and alert U.S. Border Patrol agents of illegal crossings. The towers are located in one of the nation's most-popular alien and drug-smuggling corridors. The installations were completed in June.

Boeing spokeswoman Deborah Bosick said the company is "working with our customer to solve some remaining technical issues."

Mr. Chertoff has vigorously voiced his support for the project, calling the fence "another key element in our border security strategy."

The virtual fence is part of a Homeland Security program known as the Secure Border Initiative (SBI), to be deployed along the nation's northern and southern borders. It is designed to give the agency the "best possible solution to detect, identify, classify, respond to and resolve illegal entry attempts at our land borders with Mexico and Canada," according to department officials.

Announced last year, SBI is aimed at controlling the borders and stemming the flow of illegal immigration through an integrated mix of increased staffing, more robust interior enforcement, greater investment in detection technology and infrastructure, and enhanced coordination on federal, state, local and international levels.

A critical component of the SBI strategy is SBInet, a program focused on transforming border control through technology and infrastructure. Department officials said SBInet seeks to provide front-line personnel advantages in securing the nation's land borders by fielding the most-effective mix of current and next generation technology, infrastructure, staffing and response platforms.

"SBInet will integrate the latest technology and infrastructure to interdict illegal immigration and stop threats attempting to cross borders," Mr. Chertoff said in announcing the program. "This strategic partnership allows the department to exploit private sector ingenuity and expertise to quickly secure our nation's borders."

'Virtual fence' in Arizona remains unworkable because of glitch

Associated Press
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TUCSON - Because of a continuing software glitch, the first high-tech "virtual fence" at the nation's borders remains unused, three months after its scheduled debut.

Nine 98-foot towers laden with radar, sensors and sophisticated cameras have been built across 28 miles close to the Arizona-Mexico border near Sasabe, southwest of Tucson, in an area heavily trafficked by illegal immigrant and drug smugglers.

The towers, each a few miles apart, are intended to deter or detect border-crossers and potential terrorists and to enhance the ability of Border Patrol agents to catch them. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said more testing is expected by early October.

"We are now looking to begin acceptance testing in about a month - meaning that's the point at which they (contracting officials) will say to us we think you can test this. And we will then kick the tires again," Chertoff told the House Committee on Homeland Security early this month in Washington.

But Chertoff also said he's withholding further payment to the prime contractor, Boeing Co., unless and until the pilot project in Arizona works.

Boeing spokeswoman Deborah Bosick declined to comment on Chertoff's remarks. "We're working with our customer to solve some remaining technical issues," she said.

Arizona remains the busiest part along the border with Mexico for illegal border crossings into the United States.

The virtual fence is the first stage of a plan to smother the Mexican and Canadian borders with some 1,800 such towers, all aimed at enabling the U.S. Border Patrol to identify border crossings at pinpoint locations and at improving their ability to intercept.

Department officials said about three-fourths of the \$20 million cost for the 28-mile project has been paid. The fencing was announced as part of a \$67 million initial contract last September awarded to Boeing, the bulk going to set up program management, systems engineering and planning support.

The virtual fence system is supposed to coordinate camera, sensor and radar sightings and provide a common operating picture to agents on the ground to intercept those entering the country illegally.

"The integration of all the systems into a common operating picture continues to be the challenge," said Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke. He said Boeing had put new people on the project who are working to resolve the problems.

In June, with the towers up, there was a brief delay because of a radar problem. Then, federal officials said there was a software problem.

In his Sept. 5 testimony, Chertoff said the original plan was to begin acceptance testing in June "so that we could make a determination that we were satisfied with the product and take possession of it I think in July."

Acceptance testing is "a little bit like buying a car. We didn't want to get stuck with a lemon," Chertoff said.

The individual components worked well but the system integration was not satisfactory, he said.

Boeing has "retooled their team on the ground and replaced some of the managers... they are now working through the problems of system integration as we speak," Chertoff said. "I think they put their A-team in place to do it."

As for the testing, Chertoff added, "We should get it done well before the end of the year."