

'Virtual Fence' Along Border To Be Delayed

U.S. Retooling High-Tech Barrier After 28-Mile Pilot Project Fails

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The Bush administration has scaled back plans to quickly build a "virtual fence" along the U.S.-Mexico border, delaying completion of the first phase of the project by at least three years and shifting away from a network of tower-mounted sensors and surveillance gear, federal officials said yesterday.

Technical problems discovered in a 28-mile pilot project south of Tucson prompted the change in plans, Department of Homeland Security officials and congressional auditors told a House subcommittee.

Though the department took over that initial stretch Friday from Boeing, authorities confirmed that Project 28, the initial deployment of the Secure Border Initiative network, did not work as planned or meet the needs of the U.S. Border Patrol.

The announcement marked a major setback for what President Bush in May 2006 called "the most technologically advanced border security initiative in American history." The virtual fence was to be a key component of his proposed overhaul of U.S. immigration policies, which died last year in the Senate.

Investigators for the Government Accountability Office had earlier warned that the effort was beset by both expected and unplanned difficulties. But yesterday, they disclosed new troubles that will require a redesign and said the first phase will not be completed until near the end of the next president's first term.

Those problems included Boeing's use of inappropriate commercial software, designed for use by police dispatchers, to integrate data related to illicit border-crossings. Boeing has already been paid \$20.6 million for the pilot project, and in December, the DHS gave the firm another \$65 million to replace the software with military-style, battle management software.

In an interview, Gregory L. Giddens, the department's executive director for the border effort, confirmed that "we . . . have delayed our deployment as we work through the issues on Project 28. While there is clear urgency of the mission, we also want to make sure we do this right."

Boeing has said that the initial effort, while flawed, still has helped Homeland Security apprehend 2,000 illegal immigrants since September. It estimated in 2006 that it would spend \$7.6 billion through 2011 to secure the entire 2,000-mile southern border, an

ambition that was meant to win support from conservatives for legislation creating a guest-worker program and a path to legalization for 12 million illegal immigrants.

But officials said yesterday that they now expect to complete the first phase of the virtual fence's deployment -- roughly 100 miles near Tucson and Yuma, Ariz., and El Paso, Tex. -- by the end of 2011, instead of by the end of 2008. That target falls outside Boeing's initial contract, which will end in September 2009 but can be extended.

The virtual fence was to complement a physical fence that the administration now says will include 370 miles of pedestrian fencing and 300 miles of vehicle barriers to be completed by the end of this year. The GAO said this portion of the project may also be delayed and that its total cost cannot be determined. The president's 2009 budget does not propose funds to add fencing beyond the 700 or so miles meant to be completed this year.

"The total cost is not yet known," testified Richard M. Stana, the GAO's director of homeland security issues, because DHS officials "do not yet know the type of terrain where the fencing is to be constructed, the materials to be used, or the cost to acquire the land."

The pilot virtual fence included nine mobile towers, radar, cameras, and vehicles retrofitted with laptops and satellite phones or handheld devices. They were to be linked to a near-real-time, maplike projection of the frontier that agents could use to track targets and direct law enforcement resources.

GAO investigators said that Boeing's software could not process large amounts of sensor data. The resulting delays made it hard for operators in a Tucson command center 65 miles to the north to lock cameras on targets. Radar systems were also triggered inadvertently by rain and other environmental factors. Cameras had trouble resolving images at five kilometers when they were expected to work at twice that distance, Stana said.

He added that the system was developed with "minimal input" from Border Patrol agents, resulting in an unworkable "demonstration project" instead of a operating pilot system. He blamed the DHS for acting too hastily in trying to deliver a working pilot by last June.

The effort produced "a product that did not fully meet user needs, and the project's design will not be used as the basis for future . . . development," Stana testified, adding that the DHS plans to replace most of the components. [The Wall Street Journal](#) said Saturday that Boeing's pilot project will not be replicated.

A nongovernment source familiar with the project said that the Bush administration's push to speed the project during last year's immigration debate led Boeing to deploy equipment without enough testing or consultation.

With more time, the source said, equipment and software will be tested more carefully and integrated with input from Border Patrol agents in three remote locations. "Doing it this way mitigates all kinds of risk," said the source, who was not authorized to speak publicly. Those running the project "basically took equipment, put it on towers and put it out there without any testing as such" because of the tight deadline.

Homeland Security Secretary [Michael Chertoff](#) said Friday that the department will "take elements" of the pilot project and apply them elsewhere, but that it plans to expand the number of mobile ground surveillance units from a handful to 40, and to double its fleet of three unmanned aerial vehicles. Boeing has offered DHS a \$2 million credit from the funds it has already received.

Technology at the border is "not necessarily going to be in the configuration of P28," Chertoff said, adding that unmanned aerial systems in particular "will play a major role" in most border areas.

Boeing spokeswoman Deborah Bosick said the company is referring all questions to the DHS.