SECURE BORDER INITIATIVE

Observations on Selected Aspects of SBInet Program Implementation

What GAO Found

DHS has made some progress to implement Project 28—the first segment of SBInet technology across the southwest border, but it has fallen behind its planned schedule. The SBInet contractor delivered the components (i.e., radars, sensors and cameras) to the Project 28 site in Tucson, Arizona on schedule. However, Project 28 is incomplete more than 4 months after it was to become operational—at which point Border Patrol agents were to begin using SBInet technology to support their activities. According to DHS, the delays are primarily due to software integration problems. In September 2007, DHS officials said that the Project 28 contractor was making progress in correcting the problems, but DHS was unable to specify a date when the system would be operational. Due to the slippage in completing Project 28, DHS is revising the SBInet implementation schedule for follow-on technology projects, but still plans to deploy technology along 387 miles of the southwest border by December 31, 2008. DHS is also taking steps to strengthen its contract management for Project 28.

SBInet infrastructure deployment along the southwest border is on schedule, but meeting CBP’s goal to have 370 miles of pedestrian fence and 200 miles of vehicle barriers in place by December 31, 2008, may be challenging and more costly than planned. CBP met its intermediate goal to deploy 70 miles of new fencing in fiscal year 2007 and the average cost per mile was $2.9 million. The SBInet PMO estimates that deployment costs for remaining fencing will be similar to those thus far. In the past, DHS has minimized infrastructure construction labor costs by using Border Patrol agents and Department of Defense military personnel. However, CBP officials report that they plan to use commercial labor for future fencing projects. The additional cost of commercial labor and potential unforeseen increases in contract costs suggest future deployment could be more costly than planned. DHS officials also reported other challenging factors they will continue to face for infrastructure deployment, including community resistance, environmental considerations, and difficulties in acquiring rights to land along the border.

The impact of SBInet on CBP’s workforce needs and operating procedures remains unclear because the SBInet technology is not fully identified or deployed. CBP officials expect the number of Border Patrol agents required to meet mission needs to change from current projections, but until the system is fully deployed, the direction and magnitude of the change is unknown. For the Tucson sector, where Project 28 is being deployed, Border Patrol officials are developing a plan on how to integrate SBInet into their operating procedures.

The SBI PMO tripled in size during fiscal year 2007, but fell short of its staffing goal of 270 employees. Agency officials expressed concerns that staffing shortfalls could affect the agency’s capacity to provide adequate contractor oversight. In addition, the SBInet PMO has not yet completed long-term human capital planning.