

Highlights of [GAO-11-448T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Securing the nation's borders from illegal entry of aliens, contraband, terrorists and weapons of mass destruction, is a long-term challenge. In November 2005, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) launched the Secure Border Initiative network (SBInet)—a program which was to provide the Border Patrol, within DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), with the tools to detect breaches and make agent deployment decisions by installing surveillance systems along the border. Alternative (Southwest) Border Technology is DHS's new plan to deploy a mix of technology to protect the border. This testimony is based on GAO's ongoing work conducted for the House Committee on Homeland Security and provides preliminary observations on (1) the status of SBInet and user views on its usefulness, and (2) the Alternative (Southwest) Border Technology plan and associated costs. GAO reviewed planning, budget, and system documents, observed operations along the southwest border, and interviewed DHS officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations in this statement but has made prior recommendations to strengthen SBInet. While DHS generally agreed most information in this statement, it did not agree with GAO's observations on the AOA and the potential usefulness of ATEC's analyses. GAO continues to believe its observations are valid. DHS also provided technical comments which were incorporated, as appropriate.

View [GAO-11-448T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Richard M Stana at (202) 512-8777 or stana.r@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

Preliminary Observations on the Status of Key Southwest Border Technology Programs

What GAO Found

In January 2011, the Secretary of Homeland Security directed CBP to end the SBInet program as originally conceived because it did not meet cost-effectiveness and viability standards, and to instead focus on developing terrain- and population-based solutions utilizing existing, proven technology, such as camera-based surveillance systems, for each border region. According to DHS, the Secretary's decision on SBInet was informed by (1) an independent analysis of alternatives (AOA) to determine the program's cost-effectiveness; (2) a series of operational tests and evaluations by the U.S. Army's Test and Evaluation Command (ATEC) to determine its operational effectiveness and suitability; and (3) an operational assessment by the Border Patrol to provide user input. The Secretary also stated that while the Alternative (Southwest) Border Technology plan should include elements of the former SBInet program where appropriate, she did not intend for DHS to use the current contract to procure any technology systems under the new plan, but rather would solicit competitive bids. SBInet's current surveillance capability continues to be used in Arizona. Specifically, there are 15 sensor towers (with cameras and radar) and 10 communication towers (which transmit the sensor signals to computer consoles for monitoring), currently deployed in the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector. In addition, on the basis of user feedback, the Border Patrol considers the current SBInet capability to be useful, including providing continuous surveillance in border areas where none existed before and enhancing agent safety when responding to potential threats. There are certain shortcomings including coverage gaps and radar performance limitations in adverse weather.

The Alternative (Southwest) Border Technology plan is to incorporate a mix of technology, including an Integrated Fixed Tower surveillance system similar to that used in the current SBInet capability, beginning with high-risk areas in Arizona. But, due to a number of reasons, the cost-effectiveness and operational effectiveness and suitability of the Integrated Fixed Tower system is not yet clear. First, the AOA cited a range of uncertainties, and it is not clear how the AOA analyses and conclusions were factored into planning and budget decisions regarding the optimal mix of technology deployments in Arizona. Second, the ATEC independent analyses were not complete at the time of the Secretary's decision, thus any results on SBInet's operational effectiveness and suitability could not inform the decisions to proceed with the Integrated Fixed Tower system. The President's fiscal year 2012 budget request calls for \$242 million to fund three of five future deployments of the Integrated Fixed Tower systems in Arizona, although, depending on funding, the earliest DHS expects the deployments to begin is March 2013 with completion anticipated by 2015 or later. Consistent with its intent to solicit competitive bids, CBP has initiated a new acquisition cycle, asking industry for information about the commercial availability of the Integrated Fixed Tower system. GAO will continue to assess this issue and report the final results later this year.