SECURE BORDER INITIATIVE

DHS Needs to Reconsider Its Proposed Investment in Key Technology Program

What GAO Did This Study
The technology component of the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Secure Border Initiative (SBI), referred to as SBI
net, is to put observing systems along our nation’s borders and provide Border Patrol command centers with the imagery and related tools and information needed in deciding whether to deploy agents. SBI
net is being acquired and deployed in incremental blocks of capability, with the first block to cost about $1.3 billion. Because of the program’s importance, size, and challenges, GAO was asked to, among other things, determine the extent to which DHS has (1) defined the scope of its proposed SBI
net solution, (2) developed a reliable schedule for this solution, (3) demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of this solution, and (4) acquired the solution using key management processes. To do this, GAO compared key program documentation to relevant guidance and industry practices.

What GAO Found
DHS has defined the scope of the first incremental block of SBI
net capabilities; however, these capabilities have continued to shrink from what the department previously committed to deliver. For example, the geographical “footprint” of the initially deployed capability has been reduced from three border sectors spanning about 655 miles to two sectors spanning about 387 miles. Further, the stringency of the performance capabilities has been relaxed, to the point that, for example, system performance will be deemed acceptable if it identifies less than 50 percent of items of interest that cross the border. The result is a system that is unlikely to live up to expectations.

DHS has not developed a reliable integrated master schedule for delivering the first block of SBI
net. Specifically, the schedule does not sufficiently comply with seven of nine key practices that relevant guidance states are important to having a reliable schedule. For example, the schedule does not adequately capture all necessary activities, assign resources to them, and reflect schedule risks. As a result, it is unclear when the first block will be completed, and continued delays are likely.

DHS has also not demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of this first system block. In particular, it has not reliably estimated the costs of this block over its entire life cycle. To do so requires DHS to ensure that the estimate meets key practices that relevant guidance states are important in having an estimate that is comprehensive, well-documented, accurate, and credible. However, DHS’s cost estimate for the initial block does not sufficiently possess any of these characteristics. Further, DHS has yet to identify expected benefits from the initial block, whether quantitative or qualitative, and analyze them relative to costs. As a result, it does not know whether its planned investment will produce mission value commensurate with costs.

DHS has also not acquired the initial SBI
net block in accordance with key life cycle management processes. While processes associated with, among other things, requirements development and management and risk management, have been adequately defined, they have not been adequately implemented. For example, key risks have not been captured in the risk management repository and thus have not been proactively mitigated. As a result, DHS is at increased risk of delivering a system that does not perform as intended.

SBI
net’s decreasing scope, uncertain timing, unclear value proposition, and limited life cycle management discipline and rigor are due to a range of factors, including limitations in both defined requirements and the capabilities of commercially available system components, as well as the need to address competing program priorities, such as meeting aggressive system deployment milestones. As a result, it remains unclear whether the department’s pursuit of SBI
net is a cost effective course of action, and if it is, that it will produce expected results on time and within budget.

What GAO Recommends
GAO is making recommendations to DHS aimed at (1) limiting near-term investment in the first incremental block of SBI
net, (2) economically justifying any longer-term investment in SBI
net, and (3) improving key program management disciplines. DHS agreed with 10 of GAO’s 12 recommendations, and partially agreed with the other 2. For all of the recommendations, DHS also described planned and ongoing actions to address them.

View GAO-10-340 or key components. For more information, contact Randolph C. Hite at (202) 512-3439 or hiter@gao.gov.