What GAO Found

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has taken action to deploy various resources—including agents and technology—along the southwest border and assess those resources’ contributions to border security. For example, in December 2012, GAO reported that CBP’s Border Patrol scheduled agents for deployment differently across southwest border locations, and although in most locations less than half of Border Patrol apprehensions were made within five miles of the border in fiscal year 2011, Border Patrol had moved overall enforcement efforts closer to the border since the prior fiscal year. GAO also reported in December 2012, that Border Patrol tracked changes in the effectiveness rate for response to illegal activity across border locations to determine if the appropriate mix and placement of personnel and assets were deployed and used effectively, and took steps to improve the data quality issues that had precluded comparing performance results across locations at the time of GAO’s review. For example, Border Patrol issued guidance in September 2012 for collecting and reporting data with a more standardized and consistent approach. DHS has reported the effectiveness rate as a performance measure in its Fiscal Year 2015-2017 Annual Performance Report.

Further, in March 2014, GAO reported that CBP had made progress in deploying programs under the Arizona Border Surveillance Technology Plan, but that CBP could strengthen its management and assessment of the plan’s programs. GAO reported that while CBP had identified mission benefits of technologies to be deployed under the plan, the agency had not developed key attributes for performance metrics to identify the technologies’ individual and collective contribution, as GAO had recommended in 2011. GAO also reported in 2014 that CBP officials stated that baselines for each performance measure would be developed and that by the end of fiscal year 2016, CBP would establish a tool to explain the impact of technology and infrastructure on situational awareness in the border environment. CBP should complete these actions in order to fully assess its progress in implementing the plan and determine when mission benefits have been fully realized.

In December 2012, GAO reported on Border Patrol’s efforts to develop performance goals and measures for assessing the progress of efforts to secure the border between ports of entry and informing the identification and allocation of border security resources. GAO reported that DHS had transitioned from a goal and measure related to the capability to detect, respond to, and address cross-border illegal activity to an interim performance goal and measure of apprehensions between the land border ports of entry beginning fiscal year 2011. GAO reported that this interim goal and measure did not inform program results or resource identification and allocation decisions, limiting DHS and congressional oversight and accountability. DHS concurred with GAO’s recommendation that CBP develop milestones and time frames for the development of border security goals and measures and Border Patrol works to define a new overarching performance goal for achieving a low-risk border and develop associated performance measures. CBP should complete these actions in order to fully assess its capabilities and progress to secure the border.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made recommendations for DHS to, among other things, (1) strengthen its management of technology plans and programs and (2) establish milestones and time frames for the development of border security goals and measures. DHS generally agreed and has actions underway to address the recommendations.

View GAO-16-465T. For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.