

Highlights of [GAO-11-374T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reports that the nearly 2,000-mile U.S. border with Mexico is vulnerable to cross-border illegal activity. The Office of Border Patrol (Border Patrol), within DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), is responsible for securing the border between U.S. ports of entry and has divided responsibility for southwest border miles among nine Border Patrol sectors. CBP reported spending about \$3 billion on Border Patrol's southwest border efforts in fiscal year 2010, apprehending over 445,000 illegal entries. This testimony provides preliminary observations on (1) the extent to which DHS reported progress in achieving operational control—Border Patrol was able to detect, respond, and interdict cross-border illegal activity—of the southwest border; (2) the extent to which operational control reflects Border Patrol's ability to respond to illegal activity at the border or after entry into the United States; and (3) how DHS reports the transition to new border security measures will change oversight and resource requirements for securing the southwest border. This testimony is based on GAO's ongoing work for the House Committee on Homeland Security. GAO analyzed DHS border security documents and data supporting border security measures reported by DHS for fiscal years 2005 through 2010, and interviewed DHS officials. DHS generally agreed with the information in this statement and provided clarifying language, which we incorporated.

View [GAO-11-374T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Richard M. Stana at (202) 512-8777 or [stanar@gao.gov](mailto:stanar@gao.gov).

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## BORDER SECURITY

### Preliminary Observations on Border Control Measures for the Southwest Border

## What GAO Found

Border Patrol reported achieving varying levels of operational control for 873 of the nearly 2,000 southwest border miles at the end of fiscal year 2010, increasing an average of 126 miles each year from fiscal years 2005 through 2010. Border Patrol sector officials assessed the miles under operational control using factors such as the numbers of illegal entries and apprehensions and relative risk. CBP attributed the increase to additional infrastructure, technology, and personnel. Yuma sector officials reported achieving operational control for all of its 126 border miles; however, the other eight southwest border sectors reported achieving operational control of 11 to 86 percent of their border miles. Border Patrol attributed the uneven progress across sectors to multiple factors, including prioritizing resource deployment to sectors deemed to have greater risk from illegal activity.

Border Patrol reported that its levels of operational control for most border miles reflected its ability to respond to illegal activity after entry into the United States and not at the immediate border. Operational control encompassed two of the five levels used to classify the security level of each border mile. The two levels of control differed in the extent that Border Patrol resources were available to either deter or detect and apprehend illegal entries at the immediate border (controlled) versus a multi-tiered deployment of Border Patrol resources to deter, detect, and apprehend illegal entries after entry into the United States; sometimes 100 miles or more away (managed). GAO's preliminary analysis of the 873 border miles under operational control in 2010 showed that about 129 miles (15 percent) were classified as "controlled" and the remaining 85 percent were classified as "managed." Border Patrol stated that operational control does not require its agents to be able to detect and apprehend all illegal entries. Yuma sector reported operational control for all its miles although Border Patrol did not have the ability to detect and apprehend illegal entries that use ultra-light aircraft and tunnels.

DHS is replacing its border security measures, which could temporarily reduce oversight, and reports it may reduce resources requested for securing the southwest border. Border Patrol had established border miles under effective control as a measure of border security. DHS plans to improve the quality of boarder security measures by developing new measures with a more quantitative methodology. CBP is developing a new methodology and measures for border security, which CBP expects to be in place by fiscal year 2012. In the meantime, the absence of border security outcome measures in DHS's *Fiscal Year 2010-2012 Annual Performance Report* could reduce oversight. CBP does not have an estimate of the time and efforts needed to secure the border; however, DHS, CBP, and Border Patrol headquarters officials said that this new approach to border security is expected to be more flexible and cost-effective. As a result, Border Patrol headquarters officials expect that they will request fewer resources to secure the border. GAO will continue to assess this issue and report the final results later this year.