

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-671T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

CBP employs surveillance technologies, UAS, and other assets to help secure the border. For example, in January 2011, CBP developed the Arizona Border Surveillance Technology Plan, which includes seven acquisition programs related to fixed and mobile surveillance systems, among other assets. CBP has also deployed UAS, including Predator B aircraft, as well as tactical aerostats to help secure the border. In recent years, GAO has reported on a variety of CBP border security programs and operations.

This statement addresses (1) GAO findings on DHS's efforts to implement the Arizona Border Surveillance Technology Plan and (2) preliminary observations related to GAO's ongoing work on CBP's use of UAS and tactical aerostats for border security. This statement is based on GAO products issued from November 2011 through April 2016, along with selected updates conducted in May 2016. For ongoing work related to UAS, GAO reviewed CBP documents and analyzed Predator B flight hour data from fiscal years 2011 through 2015, the time period when all Predator B centers became operational. GAO also conducted site visits in Texas and Arizona to view operation of Predator B aircraft and tactical aerostats and interviewed CBP officials responsible for these operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has previously made recommendations to DHS to improve its management of plans and programs for surveillance technologies and DHS generally agreed.

View [GAO-16-671T](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

DHS Surveillance Technology, Unmanned Aerial Systems and Other Assets

What GAO Found

GAO reported in March 2014 and April 2015 that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), had made progress in deploying programs under the Arizona Border Surveillance Technology Plan (the Plan), but could take additional actions to strengthen its management of the Plan and its related programs. Specifically, in March 2014 GAO reported that CBP's schedules and life-cycle cost estimates for the Plan and its three highest-cost programs—which represented 97 percent of the Plan's total estimated cost—met some but not all best practices. GAO recommended that CBP ensure that its schedules and cost estimates more fully address best practices, such as validating cost estimates with independent estimates, and DHS concurred. As of May 2016, CBP has initiated or completed deployment of technology for each of the three highest-cost programs under the Plan, and reported updating some program schedules and cost estimates. For example, in May 2016, CBP provided GAO with complete schedules for two of the programs, and GAO will be reviewing them to determine the extent to which they address GAO's recommendation. GAO also reported in March 2014 that CBP had identified mission benefits of technologies under the Plan, such as improved situational awareness, but had not developed key attributes for performance metrics for all technologies, as GAO recommended in November 2011. As of May 2015, CBP had identified a set of potential key attributes for performance metrics for deployed technologies and expected to complete its development of baselines for measures by the end of 2015. In March 2016, GAO reported that CBP was adjusting the completion date to incorporate pending test and evaluation results for recently deployed technologies under the Plan.

GAO's ongoing work on CBP's use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) for border security shows that CBP operates nine Predator B aircraft in U.S. airspace in accordance with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requirements. Specifically, CBP's Air and Marine Operations operates the aircraft in accordance with FAA certificates of waiver or authorization for a variety of activities, such as training flights and patrol missions to support the U.S. Border Patrol's (Border Patrol) efforts to detect and apprehend individuals illegally crossing into the United States between ports of entry. Predator B aircraft are currently equipped with a combination of video and radar sensors that provide information on cross-border illegal activities to supported agencies. CBP data show that over 80 percent of Predator B flight hours were in airspace encompassing border and coastal areas from fiscal years 2011 through 2015. CBP officials stated that airspace access and hazardous weather can affect CBP's ability to utilize Predator B aircraft for border security activities. GAO's ongoing work shows that CBP has deployed six tactical aerostats—relocatable unmanned buoyant craft tethered to the ground and equipped with cameras for capturing full-motion video—along the U.S.-Mexico border in south Texas to support Border Patrol. CBP operates three types of tactical aerostats, which vary in size and altitude of operation. CBP officials reported that airspace access, hazardous weather, and real estate (e.g., access to private property) can affect CBP's ability to deploy and utilize tactical aerostats. Border Patrol has taken actions to track the contribution of tactical aerostats to its mission activities.