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BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Collection of Unmanned Aerial Systems and Aerostats Data

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-17-152, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

As the lead federal agency charged with securing U.S. borders, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) CBP has employed a variety of technologies and assets to assist with its border security efforts. In support of its mission, CBP operates a fleet of remotely piloted Predator B UAS and uses aerostats, including tactical aerostats and TARS. GAO was asked to review CBP's use of UAS and aerostats for border security.

This report addresses the following questions: (1) How does CBP use UAS and aerostats for border security activities, and to what extent has CBP developed and documented procedures for UAS coordination? and (2) To what extent has CBP taken actions to assess the effectiveness of its UAS and aerostats for border security activities? GAO reviewed CBP documents; analyzed Predator B UAS, tactical aerostat, and TARS data on use and effectiveness from fiscal years 2013 through 2016; interviewed field and headquarters officials; and conducted site visits to observe CBP's use of UAS and aerostats along U.S. borders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that CBP document coordination procedures for Predator B operations in all operating locations, update guidance and implement training for collection of Predator B mission data, and update Border Patrol's data collection practices for aerostat asset assists. CBP concurred and identified planned actions to address the recommendations.

View GAO-17-152. For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gamblerr@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses Predator B unmanned aerial systems (UAS) for a variety of border security activities but could benefit from documented coordination procedures in all operating locations. CBP uses its Predator B UAS to support a variety of efforts, such as missions to support investigations in collaboration with other government agencies (e.g., U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and to locate individuals illegally crossing the border. GAO found that CBP established various mechanisms to coordinate with other agencies for Predator B missions but did not develop and document coordination procedures in two of its three operational centers. Without documented coordination procedures in all operating locations consistent with internal control standards, CBP does not have reasonable assurance that practices in all operating locations align with existing policies and procedures for joint operations with other federal and non-federal government agencies.

CBP uses aerostats—unmanned buoyant craft tethered to the ground and equipped with video surveillance cameras and radar technology—to support its border security activities along the southern U.S. border. In south Texas, the U.S. Border Patrol (Border Patrol) uses relocatable tactical aerostats equipped with video surveillance technology to locate and support the interdiction of cross-border illegal activity. At eight fixed sites across the southern U.S. border and in Puerto Rico, CBP uses the Tethered Aerostat Radar System (TARS) program to support its efforts to detect occurrences of illegal aircraft and maritime vessel border incursions.

CBP has taken actions to assess the effectiveness of its UAS and aerostats for border security, but could improve its data collection. CBP collects a variety of data on its use of Predator B UAS, tactical aerostats, and TARS including data on their support for the apprehension of individuals, seizure of drugs, and other events (asset assists). For Predator B UAS, GAO found mission data—such as the names of supported agencies and asset assists for seizures of narcotics—was not recorded consistently across all operational centers, limiting CBP's ability to assess the effectiveness of the program. CBP has not updated its guidance for collecting and recording mission information in its data collection system to include new data elements added since 2014, and it does not have instructions for recording mission information such as asset assists. In addition, not all users of CBP's system have received training for recording mission information. Updating guidance and fully training users, consistent with internal control standards, would help CBP better ensure the quality of data it uses to assess effectiveness. For tactical aerostats, GAO found that Border Patrol collection of asset assist information for seizures and apprehensions does not distinguish between its tactical aerostats and TARS. Consistent with internal control standards, data that distinguishes between support provided by tactical aerostats and support provided by TARS would help CBP collect better and more complete information and guide resource allocation decisions, such as the re-deployment of tactical aerostat sites based on changes in cross-border illegal activity.