Observations on Deployment Challenges

What GAO Found

SBI\textit{net} technology deployments continue to experience delays and, as a result, Border Patrol agents have to rely upon existing limited technological capabilities to help achieve control of the border. SBI program officials had originally planned to deploy SBI\textit{net} technology across the southwest border by the end of 2008, but in February 2008 this date had slipped to 2011. In July 2008, officials reported that two initial projects that had been scheduled to be completed by the end of calendar year 2008 would be finished sometime in 2009. SBI\textit{net} program uncertainties, such as not fully defined program expectations, changes to timelines, and confusion over the need to obtain environmental permits contribute to ongoing delays of SBI\textit{net} technology deployments. Due to the delays, Border Patrol agents continue to use existing technology that predates SBI\textit{net}, and in the Tucson, Arizona, area they are using capabilities from SBI\textit{net}'s prototype system despite previously reported performance shortfalls. Further delays of SBI\textit{net} technology deployments may hinder the Border Patrol’s efforts to secure the border.

The deployment of fencing is ongoing, but costs are increasing, the life-cycle cost is not yet known, and meeting DHS’s statutorily required goal to have 670 miles of fencing in place by December 31, 2008, will be challenging. As of August 22, 2008, the SBI program office reported that it had constructed a total of 341 miles of fencing, and program officials stated that they plan to meet the December 2008 deadline. However, project costs are increasing and various factors pose challenges to meeting this deadline, such as a short supply of labor and land acquisition issues. According to program officials, as of August 2008, fencing costs averaged $7.5 million per mile for pedestrian fencing and $2.8 million per mile for vehicle fencing, up from estimates in February 2008 of $4 million and $2 million per mile, respectively. Furthermore, the life-cycle cost is not yet known, in part because of increasing construction costs and because the program office has yet to determine maintenance costs and locations for fencing projects beyond December 2008. In addition, land acquisition issues present a challenge to completing fence construction.

As of September 2008, the SBI program office was reevaluating its staffing goal and continued to take actions to implement its human capital plan. In February 2008, we reported that the SBI program office had established a staffing goal of 470 employees for fiscal year 2008. As of August 1, 2008, the SBI program office reported having 129 government staff and 164 contractor support staff for a total of 293 employees. Program officials stated that a reorganization of the SBI program office and SBI\textit{net} project delays have resulted in fewer staffing needs and that they plan to continue to evaluate these needs. The SBI program office also continued to take steps to implement its human capital plan. For example, recruitment efforts are under way to fill open positions. However, the SBI program office is in the process of drafting or has drafted documents, such as the Succession Management Plan, that have yet to be approved or put into action.