

OUR OPINIONS; Rethink high-tech border watch

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Byline: DAVID MCNAUGHTON

Body

The Department of Homeland Security wants to spend as much as \$2 billion for a third generation of electronic **border** security to deter illegal immigration. But given construction problems and operational shortcomings with the first two surveillance programs targeting the Mexican and Canadian **borders**, the money might be better spent where it's sure to reduce illegal immigration: on workplace enforcement.

The idea of using cameras, sensors and unmanned aircraft to **watch** the **border** sounds appealing. After all, it would take an immense amount of manpower to provide 24-hour-a-day coverage of the nearly 2,000 miles along the U.S.-Mexico **border** or the almost 4,000-mile **border** with Canada, and fencing the entire perimeter is neither practical nor desirable.

However, the challenges involved in electronic surveillance are significant. Equipment must withstand brutal cold and heat. It has to be supplied with power through electric lines, batteries or solar power. It has to be resistant to sabotage by humans and to foraging by insects, and it must be monitored by human eyes.

Even the unmanned aircraft touted as a logical tool for **border-watching** have limitations. Cloud cover can impede their effectiveness and icing and storms can affect flights. While the aircraft can stay aloft for extended periods, they are twice as expensive to operate as manned airplanes and not as effective in apprehending illegal **border** crossers, according to Homeland Security's inspector general.

The surveillance sensors also produce a high number of false alarms, which means overworked law enforcement officers are sent on a lot of wild-goose chases. In December, Inspector General Richard Skinner told a House subcommittee that his office "determined that more than 90 percent of the responses to sensor alerts resulted in 'false alarms' --- something other than illegal alien activity, such as local traffic, outbound traffic, a train or animals."

The hit-and-miss performance of the **border** surveillance policy argues for an approach with better odds of succeeding. The \$2 billion could be spent much more wisely, and with more effect on illegal immigration, by expanding and improving the program through which employers can quickly verify the Social Security numbers of would-be workers. If illegal immigrants know they can't find work in the United States, they'll stop testing the limits of **border** surveillance.

--- David McNaughton, for the editorial board (dmcnaughton@ajc.com)

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