

Boeing waits for word on fence Government is deciding whether to accept first phase of border device.

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Body

A **decision** is "imminent" on whether to **accept** the **first phase** of **Boeing** Co.'s "virtual **fence**" along the Mexican **border**, Homeland Security officials said Thursday.

The \$20 million pilot project, which is six months overdue, is a key piece of **government** plans to secure the southern **border** against illegal immigration. And if, as planned, it is rolled out across the entire **border**, it could be a huge job for **Boeing's** St. Louis-based defense unit, which is the lead contractor.

Testing on the **first phase**, a 28-mile stretch of towers with radar and cameras scanning the desert south of Tucson, known as Project 28, wrapped up last week. Now the **Border** Patrol is **deciding** whether it meets specifications.

"There are no more steps in this process," said Michael Friel, a spokesman for Customs and **Border** Protection. "We're at the point at which a **decision** is pending."

No time line has been set, Friel said, but a **decision** is "imminent."

It shouldn't be, says the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, because it doesn't appear Project 28 yet works as intended.

In a letter sent Wednesday, Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., urged Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to delay acceptance until he was "certain that Project 28 performs as it was originally billed," not as a test platform but as a fully-functional tool for **border** security. He also asked for further clarification on what has caused the delays, prompted by software woes and problems synchronizing radar and cameras that agents can use to watch **border**-crossers across vast distances.

The project has attracted a lot of attention in Washington, and the delays have been a thorn in **Boeing's** side for months.

Homeland Security sent Project 28 back for more work after tests earlier this year and has withheld the final \$5 million **Boeing** is due to be paid. Chertoff has threatened to give the job to someone else if **Boeing** can't fix the glitches.

A company spokeswoman declined comment Thursday, but in a recent interview, top executives said they were confident they had fixed the software problems, though the project had more than doubled in cost.

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