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Have you heard about the “virtual fence?” If not, you’re not alone; but you will surely read much more about it as immigration reform begins rolling forward. Southern Arizona is the backdrop for the groundbreaking of the virtual fence project. After three years of congressional delays, construction began recently on a virtual fence on the U.S.-Mexico border. Specifically, the groundbreaking was started in the small border town of Sasabe, Arizona where 17 virtual camera and radio detection towers will be spread across 23 miles as part of the virtual fence project.

The virtual fence project is designed to use radar, sensors and cameras that will have a range of approximately six miles and that will be equipped with nighttime infrared devices and other technologies to detect smuggling attempts and illegal entries from the Mexican border into the U.S. The sensors were designed to distinguish people from animals and allow operators to direct Border Patrol agents to people attempting to enter the country illegally. The electronic monitoring is meant to supplement pedestrian fencing and vehicle barriers that have been built along 624 miles of the border.

As we have all read, Arizona has been the busiest corridor for illegal entries and drug smuggling along the Mexican border for some time. Future plans call for placing virtual detection towers along most of the 2,000-mile Mexican border in New Mexico, California and almost all of Texas within the next five years. It will be a large project, but one that the government hopes is a significant part of the solution in addressing border security.

President George W. Bush’s five-year, \$7.6 billion cost projection has been trimmed to \$6.7 billion because a 200-mile segment in Texas was deferred, said Mark Borkowski, executive director of Department of Homeland Security’s Secure Border Initiative and its technology component, SBInet. The 200-mile stretch in southwestern Texas was cut from the virtual fence plan at this point because it was determined to be difficult to cross and expensive to monitor.

Democratic Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, whose congressional district includes Arizona’s southeastern border, said a virtual fence could play an important role in border security. She has expressed concerns over the lack of Border Patrol involvement in its initial design and development. “The challenge of deploying the system in the desert southwest was underestimated,” Giffords said. “We need the technology; we need more boots on the ground. But we need to assure transparency and accountability.”

A prototype of the virtual fence was deployed in late 2007 and is essentially now a final product ready for deployment. Now, with President Obama expressing his desire to overhaul the nation’s immigration laws, Government officials say they have learned important lessons from the mixed performance of the first 28-mile pilot project. As a result, they’re ready to move forward with the project again.

The government advises that changes have been made since the \$20 million prototype was hastily put into operation without testing. That prototype depended on inadequate police dispatching software and didn't utilize the input of Border Patrol officers. As reported in The Washington Post, the officers found that the radar systems were triggered by rain, that the satellite communications were simply too slow to allow camera operators to properly track targets by remote control and that the cameras had poor visibility. Not exactly the performance taxpayers expect.

In response to the new virtual fence, Borkowski has stated that, "This is the initiation of the no-kidding, real, SBInet system. ... We understand this a lot better. We're a lot more sophisticated." He also admitted that, "We're in the final throes of convincing ourselves that the engineering is fine."

Borkowski said DHS paid \$600 million to Boeing and that the project will utilize new software, radar, cameras and sturdier towers, and a simplified camera operation. Boeing's three-year contract expires in September of this year. However, it's expected that the Department of Homeland Security will seek to renew the contract for at least one-year while it reviews whether to change contracting strategies.

Border security is one of the most significant and vexing issues at the heart of immigration reform. It is extremely important to Americans. Any real effort to develop comprehensive immigration reform will require that the U.S. is able to effectively secure its borders. Time will tell if the virtual fence is part of the solution.

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