Border wall prototypes are unveiled, but Trump's vision still faces obstacles

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October 27, 2017

The Department of Homeland Security unveiled several border wall prototypes here on Thursday that the agency said was the first step in carrying out President Donald Trump's plan to build a barrier along the nearly 2,000-mile border that the United States shares with Mexico.

Agency officials said they would test the mockups over the next few months to determine which worked best in curbing illegal immigration and drug trafficking.

"The prototypes are vitally important to the future of border security," said Ronald D. Vitiello, the acting deputy commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, the parent agency of the Border Patrol. Vitiello said the walls were central to the agency's efforts to secure the border.

As Vitiello spoke alongside the prototypes, erected near existing fencing along the border in San Diego, a few Mexican police officers stood on the other side, watching. Before he spoke, Vitiello walked over and shook their hands.

Despite the fanfare, the prototypes are still far from the "physically imposing" and "aesthetically pleasing" border wall that Trump promised during his campaign and ordered built shortly after assuming office. For now, Trump's vision remains largely aspirational.

For one, Congress has not appropriated funds; the Homeland Security Department used money from other programs to pay for the prototypes. The House Homeland Security Committee voted to approve a bill that provides $10 billion for a border wall, but Senate Democrats have vowed to block attempts to provide funding for it.

The government would also have to seize land from private landowners, primarily in Texas, where more than 1,200 miles of the 1,900-mile border are. About 95 percent of the land in Texas is privately owned, and by some estimates, hundreds of parcels would need to be taken to construct a wall.

In 2008, when Homeland Security tried to build a border wall in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, more than 300 cases in which the government sought to take private land to build the wall ended up in court, records show. Dozens are still pending.

In deep-red Texas, where private property is considered sacrosanct, nearly the entire congressional delegation, including most Republicans, has voiced its opposition to such a wall.

Rep. Will Hurd, R-Texas, one of the party's most outspoken critics of the effort, called it the most expensive and least effective way to secure the border.

"We should be using the money we spend on border walls to invest in technologies such as sensors, camera, and other things, which are a fraction of the cost," Hurd said.

But groups like the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports stricter limits on immigration, see the wall as a key element in the government's efforts to secure the border and said it would most likely stem the flow of illegal drugs.

That position echoes statements by Trump, who has also said the wall would stop unauthorized immigrants and criminal organizations like the MS-13 gang.

But homeland security and migration experts say that a border wall is unlikely to stop either. They say the support for a wall ignores the changing dynamics of illegal immigration and the advances in technologies used by the Border Patrol and immigration officials.

"We have a much better picture of what's happening on the border now more than we ever have," said Doris Meissner, the top immigration official in the Clinton administration and a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington. "While a wall or barrier in some areas would be useful, trying to build one along the entire border would be wasteful because of all the technology we have and how illegal migration has changed."

Most people who are in the country illegally simply overstayed their visas, rather than entering the United States illegally, immigration data show. Visa overstays accounted for 66 percent of the unauthorized population in 2014, according to the most recent data available, published in March by the Center for Migration Studies in New York.

Immigration experts also note that large numbers of people apprehended at the border were not captured by Border Patrol officers or trying to evade border security; they simply walked up to agents and gave themselves up, asking for asylum.

"To put it most simply, border barriers will never stop illegal immigration because a wall or fence cannot apprehend crossers," said David J. Bier, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute. "Obviously, any obstacle to passage will reduce entries at the margin. But would other options work better and cost less than a $20 billion wall?"

And according to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the vast majority of drugs are smuggled into the country through ports of entry hidden in vehicles or carried by individuals.

Current and former officials at Customs and Border Protection acknowledged that a border wall alone would not stop illegal immigration or drugs. But they say it is a critical component of a

"layered approach" to securing the border, along with patrol officers and technology including drones, sensors and cameras.

"A wall standing by itself is not going to do the job," said David V. Aguilar, a former acting commissioner of Customs and Border Protection under President Barack Obama. "But it is an essential part of a properly designed and deployed border security system."

The walls and other types of structures impede illegal crossings and give Border Patrol additional time to react before the border crossers disappear into a waiting vehicle or a city, Vitiello said.

"Them needing to scale a barrier or choosing that place at the border to cross may change their calculations, and it gives our agents time to make an arrest," he said.

The use of border walls has grown around the world, according to research by Elisabeth Vallet, the director of Center for Geopolitical Studies at the University of Quebec at Montreal. The number of border walls has increased to nearly 70, from fewer than 20 in 2005. Since 2015, countries as diverse as Austria, Hungary, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia have announced or begun work on such barriers.

But their effectiveness, relative to other technologies, is mixed, according to a review by the Migration Policy Institute.

A report by the Government Accountability Office this year found that Customs and Border Protection had not developed a system to determine how border fencing or walls contributed to security. The accountability office noted that although apprehensions of border crossers decreased in areas that had barriers, other factors including terrain, demographics, geography, technology and the number of Border Patrol officers most likely contributed to the drop in traffic as well.

While border walls do not stop illegal immigration, they push people into more remote and dangerous areas such as mountains or deserts, said Reece Jones, a professor of geography at the University of Hawaii who has studied border walls around the world.

"A wall is a powerful symbol," Jones said. "All the other things on the border are hard to see. A wall symbolizes action whether or not it actually does anything. It shows that politicians are doing something to address what they have identified as a threat."