



High Tech at the Border Wall... and the Government Wants More

Camila Dechalus

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McALLEN, Texas — At the southern U.S. border along the Rio Grande, white SUVs and trucks drive down dirt roads full of trees and bushes so dense that it's hard to breathe when walking through them. The vehicles drive past the gated border wall and past houses located between the wall and a river that spans for miles on end.

Tall white towers dot that river. Atop each one is a 24-hour camera that spins 360 degrees and is controlled remotely by agents for U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Large white blimps, which CBP salvaged from a Pentagon reuse program, keep portions of the area under surveillance from the sky, nearly 10,000 feet in the air.

Border Patrol agents say one of the most helpful types of technology in the region is the network of underground sensors placed along the riverbank and nearby dirt trails. They detect movement and notify agents of activity, like migrants illegally scrambling across the border.

“There’s a lot of focus on just the wall. The wall is just one aspect of a multi-layered approach that we utilize to secure our borders,” says George Gomez, a Border Patrol agent in the El Paso sector of the southern border the United States shares with Mexico.

“If they’re able to actually scale the wall and come down on the U.S. side safely without injuring themselves, then they’re going to step on one of our sensors that are magnetic, seismic or infrared. And that alerts us to activity in that area,” he says.

But even these sensors have blind spots, Border Patrol agents say. For example, they can’t detect the drones used by human traffickers to map out routes where migrants can cross.

As Congress engages in its latest battle over Department of Homeland Security funding, mired by President Donald Trump’s demand to build his border wall, CBP and Border Patrol officials assert that technology is as pivotal a component to securing the border as any physical barrier.

But deploying new technology at the border has been challenging. Some advocacy groups cite privacy concerns about DHS using facial recognition programs. And adding technology has meant the Trump administration must first use eminent domain to seize private land along the border, prompting numerous legal battles with area homeowners.

Tech Questions

For fiscal 2019, Congress appropriated \$100 million for new border security technology and \$564 million for imaging equipment that can scan for narcotics and other contraband at land ports of entry. For next year, CBP has requested \$242 million for new technology, including \$105 million for border security and \$20 million for port of entry equipment, according to acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan.

“Every mile of border barrier comes with technology — it comes with fiber-optic sensors, it comes with cameras, lighting. It’s not just a dumb wall,” he told lawmakers during an April congressional hearing on the department’s budget proposal.

McAleenan said technology is essential to handling constant security threats at the border. He said having additional ground sensors, aircraft and other types of technology would improve efforts to monitor areas beyond existing physical walls.

But House Democrats argue that McAleenan has been too vague and must provide specifics about the type of technology CBP wants to deploy to ensure it won’t infringe on privacy rights.

“I have not seen what they are proposing,” says House Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson, a Mississippi Democrat, in an interview. “One of the questions we get now is, are we buying new technology or are we buying more of the same stuff?”

Even some Republicans have concerns about the technology being used.

“We may disagree on how to secure our border, but there is no question we agree upon the importance of non-intrusive inspection technology at ports of entry,” Texas GOP Rep. Daniel Crenshaw said in a statement.

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Border Patrol agents, for their part, have specific wish lists. Those working in the Rio Grande sector would like newer boats equipped with radar and night vision so they can better monitor the river. They also want money for additional video surveillance towers that can help scour miles of desert at a time.

In addition, they want funding to help with their latest challenge in stemming migrant flow at the border: drones.

Aerial Warfare

In recent months, numerous agents have reported spotting small aircraft flying between Mexico and the United States.

In April, CBP recounted in a news release how one agent monitoring the El Paso sector at night saw a small airborne object head north across the international border. The object traveled about 100 yards over U.S. soil before returning to Mexico – and then repeated the pattern. After heading back to Mexico for a third time, a group of 10 migrants made a run for the U.S. border along the same path taken by the aircraft.

Carlos Ruiz-Morales, a Border Patrol agent in the Rio Grande Valley sector, says he once saw a drone hover inches above his vehicle and stay there for several minutes, practically taunting him.

He says drone operators will track the movement of agents and spot any gaps in coverage along the southern border where migrants might cross.

“We are being constantly watched by the smugglers. They have scouts everywhere,” he says.

There were 51 “unmanned aerial systems” reported in fiscal 2018, according to a CBP spokesman. So far this year, 33 had been spotted as of July 31.

Under current regulations, Border Patrol agents are prohibited from shooting the drones down unless they feel like their lives are being threatened.

Agents said more funding to expand an aerostat program would increase the number of blimps being used to counter the increase of low-flying drones believed to be operated by drug smugglers and human traffickers. They note that on-the-ground technology and the remote video surveillance systems placed along border towers were not designed to detect these small aircraft.

However, advocacy groups and experts fear that expanding surveillance technology like the aerostat program would increase the possibility that the government will use it to capture the faces and license plates of people who live and work in the area.

“There is nothing that I see that will prevent surveillance technology deployed along the border from being used for purposes that have nothing to do with border enforcement,” says David J. Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.

“I think the administration has been very clear that they are going to use any resources that they have to push their restrictionist agenda,” he says. “We also know that journalists and American citizens have been tracked and targeted by Customs and Border Protection.”

Pressure on Private Landowners

One of the reasons why the administration hasn’t implemented more technology at the southern border, and why it hasn’t constructed new barriers in certain areas, is because parts of the region are private property.

“We wish we could have more but . . . this is privately owned land. We have to ask permission and pay the owner,” Ruiz-Morales says.

The Trump administration would have to assert eminent domain to deploy much of the technology it wants to add at the border. That would mean negotiating financial compensation

deals with landowners living on property that has been passed down in their families for generations.

The issue of the government taking private land for public use along the southern border existed years before Trump took office. But some advocates have reported that the administration has used Border Patrol agents as an intimidation tactic to coerce property owners into giving up their land.

“It’s bad enough to have a couple of lawyers from D.C. show up in their suits telling low-income and low-education landowners what to do, instead of providing them with information,” says Efrén C. Olivares, racial and economic justice director at the Texas Civil Rights Project.

“But then add two or three armed Border Patrol agents who also come to their houses. People feel threatened.”

Olivares says that when his organization asked the government why Border Patrol agents were coming to private homes with members of the Army Corp of Engineers, CBP said that the agents were serving as interpreters between the two sides — even though interpreters are supposed to be impartial.

After Democrats raised concerns, the Government Accountability Office announced in September that it would review the Trump administration’s eminent domain efforts.

Up Against the Wall

Olivares’ organization currently represents five clients fighting to keep their land out of government hands. But he says he has yet to see a single property owner win a case.

One of his clients, 74-year-old Rey Anzaldua, spent 30 years working as a CBP officer along the southern border but now finds himself battling his former employer to hold onto land his family has owned for generations in Mission, Texas.

Now a farmer, Anzaldua says the federal government has used eminent domain to seize more than 200 acres of land from his father’s family. The government recently started the process of trying to similarly possess land from his mother’s side.

“We feel that the taking of the land is unwarranted. It’s not for the public good, it’s for political reasons,” he says.

Most landowners living along the border are poor and at a financial disadvantage when the government engages in land battles, he says.

“We’ve been to court before and the judges are not very sympathetic towards the landowners. They always side for the government,” he says.

“We can try to go to court to fight this, but it’s guaranteed that we are going to lose,” Anzaldua says. “The only thing we can really fight over is the amount of money they are going to pay for the land they are going to take.”

