

# **IN** HOMELAND SECURITY

## **\$8 Billion May Not Be Enough to Pay For Trump's New Border Fence**

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The most obvious obstacle to building a steel fence is funding. For fiscal years 2006 through 2009, the FBI program received about \$3.6 billion in appropriated funds, of which about \$2.4 billion was allocated to complete approximately 670 miles of primary vehicle and pedestrian fencing. The average cost per mile of fencing varied from \$1 million to \$5.1 million, a variance which a Government accountability office report attributes to a variety of factors: the difference between building on private or public land, vehicle fence costs versus pedestrian fencing costs, differences in terrain, and the use of private contractors versus government employees.

By the end of fiscal year 2008, CBP was able to build 32 miles of secondary fence at an average cost of \$2 million per mile. However, a mere 3.5 miles of secondary fence to be built in San Diego came a plant cost of \$16 million per mile due to the rough terrain there. On top of that, CBP officials said, "SBI would need to undertake significant earth and drainage work, construct all weather access roads, and deploy additional lighting."

Taking all of these different average costs into account and using 2009 rates, CBP conservatively projected at the time that it would cost \$22.4 billion to build a single fence across the 1400 non-fenced remaining (in 2009) miles of border. That projection did not include the cost of future land acquisition or maintenance, which is CBP estimated in March 2009 to be \$6.5 billion over the course of the next 20 years. By August 2012, the U.S. government published a maintenance estimate for the existing 654 miles of border fence — \$20 million per mile to keep it at its current integrity level for a 20-year lifespan before it would need to start making major replacements.

### National Emergency Declaration

Fast-forward to 2019. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) submitted a request to Congress on behalf of the President for \$5.7 billion to construct 234 additional miles of border fence — a request that was negotiated down to \$1.375 billion in a bipartisan bill that President Trump recently signed to avert a second partial government shutdown. Shortly afterward, Trump declared a national emergency as a way of freeing up additional funding for border fence construction, primarily from the Department of Defense. After shifting money around from different government agencies, total funding for additional border fence construction would amount to approximately \$8 billion. It's likely that even this amount won't be enough for 234 miles.

To this day, the White House has not provided a cost breakdown or line item budget to Congress showing exactly how that money would be used for a border fence construction project. There has been no talk of contractors, materials, construction timelines, or anything else that would itemize how the White House is budgeting for maintenance, labor, or potential cost overruns.

In January 2019, the Cato Institute published an article explaining how these unaddressed cost overruns would impact the amount of funding necessary for OMB's requested 234 miles of additional fencing. Since 2017, administration officials at the OMB have been relatively consistent in estimating that the government cost of building a border wall is around \$24 million per mile. The Cato Institute points out that if the additional sections of border fence are built at that rate below, that would be the first time that a large government construction project has ever done so. One only needs to look at the failed "virtual fence" under the Secure Border Initiative (a.k.a. SBI net) to understand historical cost overruns related to border security.

With the announcement of the SBI strategy in 2006 came the introduction of the virtual fence — a program that, in theory, to bring together the brightest minds and best border technology available to create a network of surveillance platforms along the unfenced parts of the border. It was also doomed to become the most colossal failure in the history of US border security efforts.

### Border Fence Cost Concerns

From the start of the virtual fence, some members of Congress expressed concern about the amount of money involved in the project. Boeing was selected for the final SBI net project, and claimed it could completely wire the southwest border in three years (by 2009). Boeing also claimed that its system would be able to identify and initiate apprehension of approximately 95 percent of all border crossers. In 2008, then-DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff announced that the completion date of the virtual fence would be pushed back three years to 2011.

By mid-2009, the SBI net budget had reached \$770 million, and a new government stimulus package provided an additional \$200 million in funding. At this time, both CBP and Boeing management acknowledged that the initial 28 "test miles" of the virtual fence were a mess. Despite that, DHS added more sections to bring the virtual fence total length of 53 miles. However, none of it was ever fully functional. By the time SBI net was canceled by former DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano in January 2011, \$1 billion had been spent on only 53 miles of virtual fence that mostly didn't work.

The argument could be made that a tangible steel fence wouldn't experience such technological glitches or setbacks. However, the Cato Institute's notes that applying a very conservative 50 percent cost overrun estimate to building the border fence today brings the total price tag to approximately \$36.6 million per mile. That brings the total fence cost to just over \$8.5 billion. The Cato Institute also looked at a small sample of large construction projects that showed cost overruns boost total project costs by an average of 3.3 fold. Using the initial OMB estimate, that would bring the projected fence cost to almost \$19 billion. This doesn't even include annual maintenance estimates, which run about \$864,000 per mile of fence at the low end.

At this point, it's difficult to say what the exact cost estimate would be for the additional 234 miles of border fence that President Trump wants to build. It is also difficult to predict if his declaration of a national emergency will be upheld in the courts, and if he will receive the \$8 billion in funding he is anticipating as a result of that declaration. However, looking at the history of DHS border fence construction and the evolution of government contracts, it's likely that Trump will be seeking additional border fence funding in the future.

*Editor's Note: Portions of this article are excerpts from Sylvia Longmire's book, Border Insecurity: Why Big Money, Fences, and Drones Aren't Making Us Safer.*