DHS inundated with bids to build facial-recognition drones

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After being flooded with submissions, the Department of Homeland Security has stopped accepting proposals more than two months before its deadline for facial-recognition drones, according to a report by NBC News.

The move comes only a month after Customs and Border Protection began soliciting proposals for consumer drones with infrared cameras and facial recognition capabilities, which will be used by U.S. Border Patrol agents to monitor the border.

Postings on the government's purchasing board revealed that the DHS stopped accepting proposals as part of its Silicon Valley Innovation Program on April 27, nearly two months before its initial July 14th deadline.

"As this was a pilot program, we were hoping to see a robust response from industry, but did not have a specific target [number of bids] in mind," said Ari Shuler, director of U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Commercial Technology Innovation Program. "Our team's expectations were exceeded as we received more than three dozen proposals."

The agency, through its Science and Technology Directorate, has already awarded tech startups with more than $1 million to develop components of the compact drone's sensor, controller and cybersecurity systems.

The total amount awarded to startups could increase by a factor of four or more by the time the drones go into operation, since the companies are awarded additional funding as they advance through each development stage.

The drones will be able to identify individuals using "facial recognition or other biometric at range," as well as track multiple people on foot, horseback or in vehicles within a three mile radius, according to specifications included in the federal request for proposals.

CBP has used drones for border-monitoring purposes since 2005. The new drones, which will be compact and lightweight enough for agents to bring into and launch from the field, would join the ranks of the larger nine Predator B drones that the agency is currently operating.

Several privacy advocates are concerned about CBP's use of facial recognition technology.

"I can understand why DHS is interested in these kinds of drones. Drones are a potentially very useful tool for law enforcement," said Matthew Feeney, a policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. "The concern I have is drones and facial recognition are two technologies that really could — without adequate oversight — change for the worse the state of surveillance in the United States."

Feeney added that only those individuals who are wanted for or have a history of violent crime should be enrolled in facial recognition databases.

More than 117 million Americans were included in mostly-unregulated law enforcement facial recognition databases in 2016, according to a report by Georgetown University's Center on Privacy and Technology.

Privacy advocates are also concerned about where exactly the drones would operate. Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst and policy expert at the American Civil Liberties Union, said that agency's authority extends beyond what many consider to be the border.

The agency is authorized to stop and search vehicles within 100 miles of the any external boundary of the United States, which the ACLU says is a zone occupied by nearly two-thirds of Americans.

CBP spokeswoman Jennifer Gabris said that CBP intends to use the drones "where there is a mission need, which extends to areas other than the southwest border" of the country.

She added that CBP agents will comply with all applicable U.S. government rules and regulations, with Obama-era regulations limiting the storage of drone-derived data to 180 days.

"If they were going to be deployed on the border proper — what every American thinks of as the border when you say border — then the surveillance issues are much diminished," Stanley said. "Once you get into areas where Americans work and live, the privacy problems escalate."