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Work to cease on 'virtual fence' along U.S.-Mexico border

By Spencer S. Hsu

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The Obama administration will halt new work on a "virtual fence" on the U.S.-Mexican border, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano announced Tuesday, diverting \$50 million in planned economic stimulus funds for the project to other purposes.

Napolitano said the freeze on work beyond two pilot projects in Arizona was pending a broader reassessment. But the move signals a likely death knell for a troubled five-year plan to drape a chain of tower-mounted sensors and other surveillance gear across most of the 2,000-mile southern border.

That vision, initiated in 2006 by President George W. Bush, called for a series of networked cameras, radar and communications gear to help speed the response of U.S. Border Patrol officers to catch illegal immigrants and smugglers over the vast border area. However, the effort has been plagued by technical problems and delays with prime contractor Boeing Corp.

Obama officials embraced the program, known as SBInet, on taking office in 2009, setting out a new five-year timetable for completion. However, the administration last month proposed cutting funding to finish SBInet's first phase by roughly 30 percent to \$574 million, under new congressional questioning about the plan's feasibility.

In a four-sentence statement, Napolitano said the department will immediately redeploy \$50 million of stimulus funds to other technology, including mobile surveillance devices, sensors, radios and laptop computers.

"Not only do we have an obligation to secure our borders, we have a responsibility to do so in the most cost-effective way possible," Napolitano said. "The system of sensors and cameras along the Southwest border known as SBInet has been plagued with cost overruns and missed deadlines."

In a statement, House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-Miss.) called SBInet "a grave and expensive disappointment."

"Today's announcement is recognition that this troubled program needs better management and stronger oversight," Thompson said, adding that his committee would examine the program in a hearing Thursday.

In recent weeks, congressional Democrats have stepped up criticism of the program.

Rep. David Price (D-N.C.), head of a House homeland security funding panel, noted last month at a House hearing that completion of SBInet's first phase could take until 2013, and no funding has been requested for Block 2. "With only deployment to about 50 miles of the border scheduled, it appears that SBInet deployment will take many more years," Price said.

Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.), chairman of the Senate homeland security committee, criticized the multibillion-dollar contract to Boeing. "I continue to have concerns about this program's implementation," he said in statement.

DHS has spent \$3.4 billion on border fencing in recent years, completing 640 of a planned 652 miles of fencing and vehicle barriers as part of the Secure Border Initiative. Block 1 of SBInet, the technology portion of the plan, was budgeted to spend \$700 million to erect about 50 camera and radio towers on a 28-mile segment south of Tucson and a 30-mile stretch near Ajo, Ariz.

Last year, DHS officials predicted SBInet would cost \$6.7 billion to secure the full border, minus a 200-mile span in southwestern Texas that is difficult to cross and expensive to monitor.

The Government Accountability Office, Congress's audit arm, has found the government rushed to use off-the-shelf equipment without adequate testing. Boeing initially relied on police dispatching software that was not able to process the vast flow of information streaming from the desert, and other technical problems plagued cameras and radar.

SBInet is the federal government's third attempt to secure the border with technology. Between 1998 and 2005, it spent \$429 million on earlier surveillance initiatives that were so unreliable that only 1 percent of alarms led to arrests.

Analysts say technology remains a vital component of efforts to secure the border, a goal that includes combating terrorism, organized crime, drug cartels and illegal immigration. Tightened border security has also been viewed as a prerequisite for winning Senate approval of legislation that would extend legal status to some of an estimated 10.8 million illegal immigrants in the United States.

Federal officials have said their goal was to enable the Border Patrol to detect 70 to 85 percent of incursions with as few as 22,000 to 25,000 officers. The agency has doubled in size over the past decade, to 20,000 officers.