

Drone Patrols on US Border Ineffective, Report Finds

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Military-grade drones are too costly and ineffective for US border patrol, suggests a US inspector general report. “Customs and Border Protection has used drones since 2004 to aid investigations and patrol borders,” reports Jack Nicas for the Wall Street Journal. “The Inspector General report estimated the drone program cost \$62.5 million in fiscal 2013.... Some independent analysts and the Inspector General previously have criticized the cost-effectiveness of border-monitoring drones, while a recent bill proposed in the Senate called for drones to patrol borders at all times.” The report suggests that flight and patrol hours were not maximized. The report recommends the department against additional purchase of drones at an average cost of \$31.5 million each. One analyst concludes that border surveillance does not require costly military-grade devices. – YaleGlobal

US report says border agency’s use of drones has been more expensive and less effective than previously thought

Jack Nicas

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Using drones to guard the U.S. border has been more costly and less effective than previously thought, according to a government watchdog report.

The report, released Tuesday by the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Inspector General, said the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency flew its fleet of 10 unmanned aircraft only 5,102 hours in fiscal year 2013, less than a quarter of the time the agency had projected.

As a result, the report estimated that the agency spent \$12,255 an hour to fly its drones, nearly five times what Customs and Border Protection has reported. The document said drones aided less than 2% of the agency’s apprehensions of illegal border crossings that year.

Customs and Border Protection said the report inaccurately analyzes the cost and success of its drones, which have “achieved or exceeded all relevant performance expectations.”

A spokesman said the agency’s drones aren’t credited with many apprehensions because they typically monitor large stretches of the border to identify hot spots, rather than follow individual targets. “For the big picture, it’s doing great,” he said.

Customs and Border Protection has used drones since 2004 to aid investigations and patrol borders. The agency uses unarmed versions of the Predator B, a drone made by General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc. The U.S. military uses similar drones for missile strikes abroad.

Some independent analysts and the Inspector General previously have criticized the cost-effectiveness of border-monitoring drones, while a recent bill proposed in the Senate called for drones to patrol borders at all times.

The Inspector General report estimated the drone program cost \$62.5 million in fiscal 2013, of Customs and Border Protection's total budget of \$11.7 billion. The report said that, in addition to flying for less time than planned, the drones patrolled fewer miles of the border and deployed a high-power sensor less often.

Customs and Border Protection said bad weather and insufficient funds to pay for personnel and spare parts contributed to the shortfall in flight time, according to the report.

The report recommended that Customs and Border Protection shelve a proposal to spend \$443 million to buy 14 new drones.

The agency said it was authorized to spend that money on new drones, but it plans to acquire only one aircraft to replace a drone that crashed last year off the coast of San Diego. It said it would use existing funds "to expand the program's infrastructure and achieve a greater level of utilization of its existing fleet."

The agency recently has added drone-mounted sensors—dubbed Vader, for Vehicle and Dismount Exploitation Radar—that automatically detect small moving objects on the ground. The report criticized the agency for allegedly restricting the use of Vader to around a single border station so that authorities could apprehend people detected by the sensor. The agency said it doesn't restrict Vader use.

Customs and Border Protection drones also patrol maritime routes used by drug smugglers, aid local law enforcement at active crime scenes and assess damage after natural disasters.

In 2011, for example, an agency drone mapped Mississippi River flooding. And in October, an agency drone fed aerial footage to local authorities in Minnesota as it handled the case of an active shooter.

The Inspector General report focused on fiscal 2013, when the agency's drones helped apprehend 2,525 people.

In fiscal 2014, the drones flew about 10% fewer hours and helped apprehend 27% fewer people. That drop came at least partly because the agency grounded its fleet temporarily after one of its drones crashed in the Pacific Ocean in January 2014 when the aircraft lost power. The agency said the drone cost \$12 million.

Tom Barry, a policy analyst who has studied border drones for the liberal Center for International Policy, said such expensive devices are part of the reason the agency's drone program isn't cost effective.

"I don't want to say drones have no place in border control," he said, "but expensive, military-grade drones have not proven effective in catching immigrants or stopping drug flows."

Jack Nicas is a staff reporter who writes about aviation for the Journal, covering airlines, commercial drones and air safety and security.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/inspector-general-criticizes-u-s-border-drone-progra...>

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