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CBP Drones are Dubious Achievers

After spending eight years and hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has yet to prove the value of its Unmanned Aircraft System (drone) program while drastically understating the costs, according to a new report by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Inspector General (OIG). Based on its findings, OIG recommends that CBP abandon plans to spend \$443 million more on additional aircraft and put those funds to better use.

"U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Unmanned Aircraft System Program Does Not Achieve Intended Results or Recognize All Costs of Operations," the OIG's second audit of the program since 2012, found the effort by CBP's Office of Air and Marine (OAM) still has no reliable method of measuring its performance and that its impact in stemming illegal immigration has been minimal.

The OIG specifically found that, during Fiscal Year 2013:

- OAM calculated that it cost \$2,468 per hour to operate a drone. OIG found the actual price tag to be \$12,255 per hour, noting that OAM omitted such key costs as salaries for operators, equipment and overhead.
- Flight time fell far short of OAM's goal of 16 hours per day, 365 days per year. OIG found the drones, which were often grounded by weather, were airborne for only 22 percent of those goal hours.
- While CBP has touted drone surveillance of the entire Southwest Border (1,993 miles from Texas to California), the majority of deployment was limited to a 100-mile stretch in Arizona and a 70-mile segment in Texas.
- Drone surveillance was credited with assisting in less than 2 percent of CBP apprehensions of illegal border crossers.

"Notwithstanding the significant investment, we see no evidence that the drones contribute to a more secure border, and there is no reason to invest additional taxpayer funds at this time," said Inspector General John Roth. "Securing our borders is a crucial mission for CBP and DHS. CBP's drone program has so far fallen far short of being an asset to that effort."

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