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Border Camera System Is Assailed

By John Mintz
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Members of Congress yesterday denounced a \$239 million camera system installed on the Mexican and Canadian borders as a scandal and an embarrassment, citing defective equipment, rampant overcharging by contractors and a failure by the U.S. Border Patrol and other government officials to properly oversee it.

"What we have here, plain and simple, is a case of gross mismanagement of a multimillion-dollar contract," Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Ala.), chairman of the House Homeland Security subcommittee on management, said at a hearing yesterday. "Worst of all, it's seriously weakened our border security."

"Chronic inattention" by officials of the Border Patrol and the General Services Administration helped cause the problems of the Border Patrol's Integrated Surveillance Intelligence System (ISIS) of cameras and sensors, installed over seven years before work was halted last year, according to testimony by Joel S. Gally, the GSA's deputy inspector general.

Many of the ISIS cameras, which were placed on 50- to 80-foot poles by the contractor, International Microwave Corp. (IMC), break down frequently. The wiring of cameras on Canada's border with Washington was so poor that many cameras there often swivel uncontrollably in hot weather. Some pieces of uninstalled equipment were found in the Arizona desert.

The project began in 1998, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service, then the Border Patrol's parent agency, chose IMC as the contractor for its first phase, which was worth \$2 million. Gally said the GSA inspector general was not given access to documents on that selection.

In 1999, the INS transferred the oversight to the GSA, which, without asking for competing bids, handed IMC the contract's second phase, worth at least \$200 million. Federal contract law prohibits such noncompetitive contract extensions from being so dramatically out of scale with the original contract, Gally said. He also said GSA officials had no incentive to limit costs because they were rewarded as the contract grew.

The performance of government officials and their contractors is the subject of a continuing investigation that could lead to administrative or criminal charges, Gally testified.

The House subcommittee had intended to seek assurances at yesterday's hearing from the Border Patrol and from officials of the Department of Homeland Security that they will not repeat the errors as they launch a planned \$2.5 billion follow-on program, America's Shield Initiative (ASI). But DHS officials decided that nobody from the department would appear, in part because Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff

is rethinking the project as part of a large departmental review.

Customs and Border Protection spokeswoman Kristi Clemens said in a statement that the ISIS is being maintained. She said her agency is "acknowledging lessons learned from the ISIS program and [is working] to ensure that ASI is properly managed."

IMC was bought by L-3 Communications Corp. in 2003. Yesterday, an L-3 executive, Joseph A. Saponaro, testified that, despite the ISIS's "shortcomings," the GSA inspector general made many "clearly erroneous" allegations.

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