



Published: 12.07.2007

Hurdle to virtual fence is cleared

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The administration's plan to use technology and physical barriers to keep people from illegally entering the country is back on track this week.

A virtual fence along a 28-mile stretch of Arizona will get the government's conditional stamp of approval today, allowing it to move into the next testing phase.

Earlier this year Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff withheld partial payment to contractor Boeing Co. because the technology the company used in a pilot project near Tucson did not work properly.

Also ahead, Chertoff will tell landowners along 225 non-contiguous miles stretching from California to Texas that they have 30 days to give the government permission to access their properties. The government needs the approval to determine whether it's even possible to build a fence on their land. If landowners do not agree within 30 days, Homeland Security will issue temporary condemnation orders to gain access.

As of Tuesday, 200 landowners had not given the department permission, according to a Homeland Security official. Most of the landowners who have not given approval are in Texas and Arizona.

The 225 miles of physical fencing and the 28-mile virtual fence are part of the government's plan to keep people from illegally entering the U.S. If the 28-mile virtual fence is successful, elements of it could be used as a prototype along other parts of the southern and northern borders. The project is being tested in Arizona because over much of the last decade, more illegal immigrants have crossed from Mexico than anywhere else on the border.

The virtual fence includes 98-foot unmanned towers that are equipped with sophisticated technology including radar, sensor devices and cameras capable of distinguishing people from cattle at about 10 miles.

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