

New drone headed for border

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By Eric Swedlund / Arizona Daily Star

The U.S. Border Patrol is adding a \$14 million unmanned aerial vehicle to monitor Arizona's borderlands, hoping the high-tech drone will improve efforts at cracking down on illegal drug trafficking and human smuggling.

The new UAV contract announced Tuesday follows last year's test program in which two \$2.5 million drones patrolled in rotating eight-hour shifts along the border.

In a statement released Tuesday, Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz., said the effectiveness of the pilotless surveillance aircraft has been demonstrated by years of military operations in remote areas like Afghanistan.

Earlier this year, Kolbe had criticized the Department of Homeland Security's office of Customs and Border Protection for canceling an earlier contract for the use of drones.

"I applaud them for finally moving forward and selecting the 'Predator B' as the UAV that will keep a watchful eye on our borders," Kolbe said in the press release. "They can't get them in the air soon enough as far as I am concerned."

The Predator B, made by General Atomics Aeronautical Services Inc., of San Diego, was selected after an extensive evaluation of the pilot program, said Mario Villarreal, a spokesman for Customs and Border Protection, which oversees the Border Patrol.

"One of the things that is different with this system is its speed," Villarreal said. "It will be used to detect any type of activity that's happening on that portion of the border."

The Predator B can reach speeds of up to 230 mph and fly as high as 50,000 feet, though it will usually be used about 15,000 to 20,000 feet. It has the capability to fly for 30 hours.

The initial order is for one UAV for \$14 million, which includes support services and maintenance.

The Predator B has "state-of-the-art electro-optic sensors, communications payloads, and sophisticated on-board sensors that will provide unparalleled surveillance capability," according to Customs and Border Protection. Border Patrol agents will control the drone and monitor real-time images.

"It'll supplement the already existing fleet of aircraft that we use in Arizona and supplement the front-line agents," Villarreal said.

The Border Patrol tested two Hermes 450 UAVs last year. Those craft were able to fly at more than 100 mph and remain in the air for 20 hours at a stretch.

The Predator B will be deployed in late September in support of Phase II of the Arizona Border Control Initiative, launched this summer.