



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on May 1, 2012

Surveillance Drones Don't Live Up To Expectations

Nearly two years after Predator B drones were [deployed](#) along the Texas/Mexico international border, the unmanned surveillance aircraft have proven to be, well, not worth it. The drones were intended to augment the presence of border agents and physical barriers such as some 700 miles of intermittent border fencing along the Rio Grande River. *The Hill* reported on June 10, 2010 that setting up a single drone in Corpus Christi, Texas (on the Gulf Coast), would have an estimated cost of between \$20 and \$80 million to focus on the Texas border alone.



Even the governor of the Lone Star State, [Rick Perry](#) had more faith in the aircraft than has been borne out. He told a New Hampshire audience last August, "Because if we will commit to that, [using predator drones] I will suggest to you that we will be able to drive the drug cartels away from that border."

But, according to the *Los Angeles Times* for April 30, 2012 "Mixed results show a glaring problem for Homeland Security officials who have spent six years and more than \$250 million building the nation's largest fleet of domestic surveillance drones. The nine Predators that help police America's borders have yet to be very useful in stopping contraband or illegal immigrants."

The newspaper referenced a 2012 audit of the drone program by the Homeland Security Department's inspector general, revealing some problems. In 2010 the fleet flew about half the number of hours scheduled by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) on both the northern and southern borders and the Caribbean, as well as costing more than expected to operate, and, just like other aircraft, the units are subject to grounding by unfavorable weather.

In addition, they require an hour of maintenance for every hour they fly, and cost about \$3000 per hour to fly. T.J. Bonner, former president of National Border Patrol Council claims, "The big problem is that they are more expensive than traditional methods."

In fact, the *Los Angeles Times* reported October, 2011 that Homeland Security was provided by Congress with three unrequested new drones to patrol the Mexican border; they're struggling to finance and provide ground-based pilots for the drones they already have. Congressional approval for the aircraft funding was for only the drones, not hiring or training of pilots, or for spare parts. The article added, "The new drones are being purchased after lobbying by members of the so-called drone caucus in Congress, many from districts in Southern California, a major hub of the unmanned aircraft industry."

But to help pay for them, CBP "raided budgets of its staffed aircraft. One result: Flight hours were cut by 10 percent for the P-3 Orion maritime surveillance planes that hunt smuggling ships on the West Coast and in the Caribbean."

On the Texas border, the drones are often lent to the FBI, the Texas Rangers, or for disaster relief,



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therefore are sometimes unavailable for border agents to use for surveillance.

Retired Air Force major general Michael Kostelnik, who heads the drone supervision office, acknowledged that the amount of drugs seized in Predator raids is “not impressive”, but said it’s premature to criticize their use. He claims a terrorist attack to Washington or New York City could result in drone deployment in five hours, to help policy makers and first responders. “It is not about the things we are doing today,” Kostelnik said. “It is about the things we might be able to do.”

In times of budgetary stress such as these, critics are calling for wiser expenditures and immediate results, and the border is especially vulnerable.



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