

DHS asks industry to help secure borders

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Homeland Security Department officials said last week they are open to ideas from the private sector on improving the nation's border security, including outsourcing work currently done by government employees and using satellites to monitor remote regions.

Hundreds of representatives from private companies crammed into an auditorium at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington Thursday for a presentation on the department's multibillion-dollar Secure Border Initiative.

"This is an unusual invitation," Homeland Security Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson told the crowd. "We're asking you to come back and tell us how to do our business."

The initiative will replace and expand upon previous efforts that failed to materialize, namely the Integrated Surveillance Intelligence System and America's Shield Initiative. The difference this time is that DHS plans to develop a comprehensive border security approach that integrates surveillance technology, physical infrastructure, personnel and processes, department officials said.

The department ultimately envisions SBI as having three integrated components: improved border security, strong interior enforcement to go after illegal aliens and employers who knowingly hire them, and a temporary worker program allowing migrants to enter the country legally.

DHS plans to issue a solicitation for the border security component -- called SBInet -- in late March or early April, and to select a prime contractor by the end of September. The Customs and Border Protection bureau is managing that effort. Particular emphasis will be placed on detecting and preventing illegal activity along the border with Mexico, where the majority of illegal immigrants enter the country.

"We are looking for the type of integrated team that will work with us in an aggressive, fast, innovative cycle to do this job right," Jackson said. "For the entire time that we've been engaged over years in trying to enforce the border, we have never -- in my view -- had a credible plan for taking control of the entire Southwest border."

Jackson said industry should not feel constrained by ways in which CBP currently handles border security. He asked, for example, whether the Border Patrol could hand off

illegal immigrants that it apprehends to an outsourced team, which would then handle transportation and processing. He also questioned whether satellites or other advanced sensors could be used to monitor border regions.

Along with technology suggestions, the department is seeking ideas on how to better manage personnel and processes. But Jackson appealed to industry to pitch ideas that have been proven to work, rather than concepts that need time and testing.

"There is a large open swath, a big open door, for a short period of time in which we hope to invite the smartest people in this country to help us think through this important public policy objective," Jackson said.

Greg Giddens, the SBI program's executive director, said all of the components are intertwined and must work hand in hand. Giddens has been assigned to work with Julie Myers, new head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, on interior enforcement and Emilio Gonzalez, the new director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, on the guest worker program.

The idea of a temporary worker program, however, has met opposition in Congress. The House passed legislation in December that would toughen controls along the border but that noticeably excludes a guest worker program. The Senate is expected to take up its version of the legislation in February and to include a temporary worker program, setting the stage for tough conference negotiations.

Jackson said the department will "be working very aggressively in the months ahead to persuade Congress to adopt the temporary worker program." He added the department will have to ensure that CIS can handle a large influx of registrations for the program.

The immigration services agency is trying to eliminate a backlog of applications for benefits.

Jackson also said the department faces "significant work and investment" to ensure that ICE can handle its share of the border security initiative.

"We're going to throw all the help we can in the department to manage this procurement," he said.

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