

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Homeland Security adding 3 drone aircraft despite lack of pilots

The unmanned Predators will be added to a force used chiefly to patrol the border with Mexico after lobbying by members of the 'drone caucus.'

October 27, 2011 | By Brian Bennett, Washington Bureau

Reporting from Washington — The Homeland Security Department is adding three surveillance drone aircraft to a domestic fleet chiefly used to patrol the border with Mexico even though officials acknowledge they don't have enough pilots to operate the seven Predators they already possess.

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.

"We didn't ask for them," said a Homeland Security official who spoke on condition of anonymity to speak frankly.

Officials said the Customs and Border Protection Office of Air and Marine, which operates the drones, has enough pilots to fly the current fleet only five days a week.

Congress approved \$32 million to buy the new drones last August. But the authorization did not include money to train or hire new pilots or crews, or to buy spare parts, officials said.

Every unmanned aircraft requires not just a ground-based pilot, but a platoon of surveillance analysts, sensor operators and a maintenance crew.

Homeland Security officials say they ultimately hope to deploy 18 to 24 drones along the borders.

For now, however, they say that they must shift money from other programs to buy the satellite bandwidth required to fly the seven drones they use.

"That is year-by-year, hand-to-mouth living," said a federal law enforcement official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

Customs and Border Protection has paid \$240 million to manufacturer General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., a private company in San Diego, for drones and maintenance since 2005, according to government contract data.

Since 2005, the company's political action committee has given \$1.6 million to campaigns of members of Congress, including some in the drone caucus, according to data provided by the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan organization in Washington that tracks political fundraising. Some privacy watchdog groups suggest the contributions are driving the policy, a charge lawmakers deny.

"This is a symptom of how surveillance technology is spreading around the U.S.," said Jay Stanley, a senior analyst on privacy and technology at the American Civil Liberties Union. "A lot of times it is not being pulled by people on the ground. It is being pushed from above by people who want to sell it."

The newest Predator B was scheduled to arrive in Corpus Christi, Texas, on Wednesday night. Another Predator was slated for delivery to Sierra Vista, Ariz., before the end of the year.

A third drone, a version of a Predator B called a Guardian that is designed to fly over the open ocean, will be based at Cape Canaveral, Fla., early next year to help track boats used by drug runners.

The drone caucus, officially the Congressional Unmanned Systems Caucus, has 50 members, including 10 representing Southern California. They seek to expand the government's use of unmanned aircraft in domestic airspace.

"I would rather use technology to patrol the border than use a 14th century technology like a fence," Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Texas) said in a telephone interview Wednesday. Cuellar leads the bipartisan caucus with Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-Santa Clarita).

Rep. Brian P. Bilbray (R-Carlsbad) says the CIA's use of armed Predators against militants in Pakistan has made the drone a kind of folk hero for many Americans. General Atomics is headquartered in his district.

"If you could register the Predator for president, both parties would be trying to endorse it," he said.

brian.bennett@latimes.com