

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106893](#), a testimony before the Subcommittees on Border Security and Enforcement, and Oversight, Investigations and Accountability, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

A January 2017 Executive Order directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to immediately plan, design, and construct a wall or other physical barriers along the southwest border. From fiscal years 2017 through 2021 DHS received funding to construct border barriers. A 2019 Presidential Declaration of National Emergency directed DOD to support barrier construction and USACE awarded billions of dollars in construction contracts. In January 2021, a Presidential Proclamation paused border barrier construction to the extent permitted by law.

This testimony discusses (1) USACE's contract obligations and awards in fiscal years 2018 through 2020 to support barrier construction on the southwest border, (2) the factors that drove USACE's acquisition approach, and (3) the status of barrier completion as of January 2021 and subsequent DHS planning efforts.

This statement is based on seven reports GAO issued between 2017 and 2023. For that work, GAO analyzed DHS and USACE documents and data and interviewed agency officials. GAO also conducted selected updates.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made five recommendations in prior reports related to the deployment and contracting process for border barrier construction. DHS and DOD concurred and fully addressed four. For the recommendation related to analyzing costs associated with future barrier segments, DHS noted that it conducts cost estimates as part of the acquisitions process.

View [GAO-23-106893](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gamblierr@gao.gov or Timothy J. DiNapoli at (202) 512-4841 or dinapolit@gao.gov.

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SOUTHWEST BORDER

Award and Management of Barrier Construction Contracts

What GAO Found

GAO's past work has highlighted the increased investment associated with construction and deployment of barriers on the southwest border. For example, in June 2021 GAO reported that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)—the construction agent—obligated \$10.7 billion to support the border barrier efforts from fiscal years 2018 through 2020, almost all of which was obligated on construction contracts. More than 70 percent of the funds obligated on construction contracts during this time were Department of Defense (DOD) funds made available following the President's 2019 National Emergency Declaration. During this time period, USACE awarded 39 construction contracts, primarily DOD-funded, to build more than 600 miles of border barriers. Approximately 32 percent of the miles to be built under these contracts were new barriers in areas where no barriers had previously existed, while about 68 percent of the miles were to replace existing barriers.

In June 2021, GAO also reported that USACE's acquisition approach, among other things, was driven by the need to obligate DOD funding before it expired. In response to the 2019 National Emergency Declaration and with the influx of DOD funds, USACE changed its planned acquisition approach to expedite construction. For example, USACE used noncompetitive awards to a greater extent than originally planned. In addition, USACE structured many of its DOD awards to prioritize the construction of barrier panels, rather than the full barrier system (which included panels and supporting attributes, such as technology).

Border Barrier Construction in South Texas



Source: GAO photo taken in February 2020. | GAO-23-106893

As of January 2021, when the new administration directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and DOD to pause ongoing construction for the border contracts to the extent permitted by law, USACE reported that it had completed approximately 450 miles of barriers. Most of these miles represented the installation of panels, rather than the completion of the full barrier system. Less than 69 of these miles—or about 15 percent—were for completed barrier system as of January 2021. Since that time, DHS issued and updated a plan for use of border barrier funds. DHS intends to use its funding to continue addressing safety hazards, identify actions to address environmental damage from past barrier construction, and install system attributes for DHS- and DOD-funded projects, such as lighting and technology.