

# US testing surveillance balloons on Mexico border

August 23 2012, by CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN

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(AP) — Floating 2,500-feet (762-meters) above scrub-covered U.S. ranchland near the Mexico border, the payload of high-tech cameras onboard a balloon being used by the Border Patrol can easily see a cluster of reporters and the make, model and color of their vehicles a couple of miles away.

In Iraq or Afghanistan, where the technology has already proven effective at spotting attackers, such balloons provide surveillance around bases. U.S. officials think they could be equally helpful in tracking drug smugglers and illegal immigrants along a rugged stretch of the Rio Grande that doesn't have any segments of border fence.

The [Border Patrol](#) is testing two blimp-shaped, helium-filled balloons, which are on loan from the [Defense Department](#). Congressional staff members joined Homeland Security and Defense Department officials Wednesday near the border town of Roma, about 260 miles (400 kilometers) south of San Antonio, to see what the aerostats can do. Members of the media were given a more limited glimpse of the devices' capabilities.

The two aerostats — one about 55 feet (17 meters) long, the other 72 feet (22 meters) — being tested along the border are made in North Carolina by TCOM, a company with its headquarters in Maryland.

At the altitude displayed Wednesday, the white, 72-foot (22-meter) -long [balloon](#) is small but visible. Near where it's tethered, operators inside a

windowless shipping container outfitted with air conditioning and three banks of video monitors scan the area, zoom in on vehicles a couple of miles away, switch to infrared and quickly pick up a vehicle moving through a parking lot.

The balloons' cameras can easily reach across the river to Mexico, but Border Patrol spokesman Henry Mendiola said that isn't the intent.

"Especially in this area upriver from La Joya where we have no infrastructure, we have no technology, everything down here is still being done by boots on the ground, and so this type of technology would make our job a little more efficient," he said.

The 72-foot (22-meter) model can stay airborne for at least 14 days. While the aerostats can't cover nearly the range of a helicopter or drone, they are far less expensive to operate and can be moved if needed.

Since the testing began Aug. 10, the balloons have already assisted agents patrolling the area. "We have seen some successes off of the aerostat in the testing phase," Mendiola said, declining to give details.

On the border, agents already employ an arsenal of surveillance tools that includes airplanes, helicopters, drones, boats, ground-based sensors and agents equipped with night-vision goggles.

Last year, the U.S. government dumped SBInet, a yearslong attempt to build a "virtual fence" along the border that cost nearly \$1 billion. The aerostats, however, as well as an 80-foot (25-meter) tower with similar surveillance capabilities also being tested at the border, reflect an attempt to make use of the vast inventory of equipment that's been used in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Border Patrol tested a similar balloon-mounted surveillance system

in Arizona in March, and a variety of other Defense Department devices are also expected to be tested at the border in coming months.

The agency doesn't have a set end date for the testing period in Texas, Mendiola said.

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