

Holy fence

by *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Boeing's glitchy "virtual fence" may go the way of the Spruce Goose, the Stanley Steamer and Sony's Betamax: All were technological innovations that worked well on paper and less well in the real world.

After much hemming and hawing, the Department of Homeland Security this week finally approved Boeing's \$20 million assemblage of towers, cameras, radar and computers strung out over 28 miles of Arizona's border with Mexico. But the department said it has no plans to extend the system to the rest of the border anytime soon.

Boeing's St. Louis-based Integrated Defense Systems unit manages the so-called "Project 28" system. Alas, IDS, which makes the world's finest planes and missiles, discovered that it's easier to put a bomb on a bull's-eye from 20,000 feet than it is to spot men and women sneaking through deserts full of crags and canyons.

To cut costs, Boeing used off-the-shelf technology for its Arizona demonstration project. Partly as a result, engineers had trouble getting all the pieces to work together. Boeing's systems sometimes mistook cows and blowing tumbleweeds for people. It's not that the system doesn't work; it is, in fact, resulting in arrests. The system undoubtedly will improve as more bugs are worked out. It's just that Project 28 doesn't work enough to justify 2,000 miles of it from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas.

Instead, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said pieces of the system will be used at places along the border, along with pilotless spy aircraft and other tactics.

It's a shame that the system didn't work better. Our nation of immigrants no longer can take all of the huddled masses who yearn to breathe free. Securing the border is a necessary part of a rational solution to the immigration mess.

Technology certainly can help. So would a larger Border Patrol. About 18,000 border agents will be on duty by the end of this year, double the number eight years ago. Tall metal fences, the favorite solution for conservatives in Congress, make sense in well-patrolled urban areas. But they would be a waste of money in the remote desert where there's no one to watch them and they can be defeated with a ladder and a rope.

Short of building our own Iron Curtain, we never can seal the border completely. As we've said before, a rational solution to immigration requires several steps. Border security is part of it. So is a larger guest-worker program for seasonal jobs in farming, landscaping and tourism. We also must crack down on employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants in order to undercut American wages.

Finally, we need a path to citizenship for the 12 million undocumented immigrants already here. They form an underclass ripe for exploitation, and they're not going away. This is not "amnesty." It's just sound public policy.

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