

By Trevor Timm

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Despite [renewed criticism from both parties in Congress](#) that domestic drones pose a privacy danger to US citizens—and a report from its own Inspector General [recommending to stop buying them](#)—the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has indicated it wants to more than double its fleet of Predator drones used to fly surveillance missions **inside** the United States.

Yesterday, *California Watch* [reported that DHS](#) signed a contract that could be worth as much as \$443 million with General Atomics for the purchase up to fourteen additional Predator drones to fly near the border of Mexico and Canada. Congress would still need to appropriate the funds, but if they did, DHS' drone fleet woud increase to twenty-four.

While many people may think the US only flies Predator drones overseas, DHS [has already spent \\$250 million over the last six years](#) on ten surveillance Predators of its own. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—a division of DHS—uses the unmanned drones inside the U.S. to patrol the borders with surveillance equipment like video cameras, infrared cameras, heat sensors, and radar.

They say the drones are vital in the fight to stop illegal immigrants, but [as EFF reported in June](#), the DHS Inspector General issued a report faulting DHS for wasting time, money, and resources using drones that were ineffective and lacked oversight. The Inspector General [chastised the agency](#) for buying two drones last year despite knowing these problems and recommended they cease buying them until the problems could be fixed.

Perhaps worse, DHS is also flying Predator drone missions on behalf of a diverse group of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies for missions beyond immigration issues. We

know they have lent the drones out to the county sheriff's department in North Dakota and the Texas Rangers, among others, but unfortunately, we don't know the full extent DHS lending program. DHS, [as is their custom](#), is keeping that information secret.

In response, last month [EFF sued DHS under the Freedom of Information Act](#) demanding answers about how and why it loans out its Predator drones to other law enforcement agencies across the country. EFF's lawsuit asks for the records and logs of CBP drone flights conducted in conjunction with other agencies.

These drones pose a multitude of privacy concerns to all Americans, as the Congressional Research Service (Congress' non-partisan research arm) detailed in [this comprehensive report on domestic drones and the Fourth Amendment](#). The report explains drones can be equipped with, among [other capabilities](#), facial recognition technology, fake cell phone towers to intercept phone calls, texts and GPS locations, and in a few years, will even be able to see through walls.

Despite these concerns, DHS has not publicly issued any privacy rules to make sure drones do not spy on US residents in border states going about their daily lives. In fact, at a Congressional hearing on the subject, DHS [refused to send anyone to testify](#), leading both parties to criticize their absence.

This is even more troubling given DHS [is also leading the push](#) to get local police agencies to purchase their own drones by handing out \$4 million to agencies to "[facilitate and accelerate](#) their use. The FAA [estimates as many as 30,000 drones](#) could be flying over US territory by the end of the decade.

The [booming](#) drone industry, which has [announced a PR campaign](#) in an attempt tamp down the public's privacy concerns, is quick to point out that these police drones—which [cost anywhere from](#) under \$100,000 to \$1 million—are smaller than Predators and do not have the same flight time, so police would not be able to surveil Americans for hours or days at a time like Predator drones could. Yet as the technology advances rapidly and becomes cheaper every year,

smaller drones will soon be able to fly for an extended time period as well.

For example, Lockheed Martin [has developed a drone](#) that weighs only 13.2 pounds, well within the FAA's domestic weight limits, and [can be recharged by a laser on the ground](#), allowing it remain in the air *indefinitely*.

Several members of Congress [have commendably introduced bills](#) that [would protect the privacy](#) of Americans and increase transparency surrounding their use. These members, who voted for increased drone use in February but [have recently expressed second thoughts](#), should call DHS representatives before Congress to explain their position. The American people deserve answers about to whom Homeland Security is loaning its drones, how DHS plans on protecting Americans' privacy, and why they even need any more, given they are misusing the drones they already have.