Replicator initiative (US Department of Defense)

IMPLEMENTED 2023–2025 · DEFENCE AND SECURITY · US · BAND E · PARTLY PROVED
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A department-wide initiative announced in August 2023 to field thousands of low-cost autonomous systems within two years, as a test of faster procurement. A Congressional Research Service report says one former defense official noted that only hundreds had been fielded by the target date. Officials give a more favourable account, and by late 2025 the work had moved to a new group.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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Facts and figures are as reported by the sources listed below, which may be incomplete, self-reported or out of date. Check the original source before relying on any figure.

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

No measurable effect: no results reported.

AI and automation used: Autonomous uncrewed systems and the software that coordinates them, described in press as AI-enabled; the public sources opened do not itemise the AI content.

Implemented: 2023–2025. Grade: band E, No measurable effect, Partly proved.

Headline result, as reported: Announced in 2023 to field thousands of uncrewed systems by August 2025; the Congressional Research Service reports a former defense official saying only hundreds were fielded by then, and the effort has since moved to a new group

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 5 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

US Department of Defense (Defense Innovation Unit). US Department of Defense initiative led by the Deputy Secretary's office, with the Defense Innovation Unit as executive secretary of its steering group (GAO). The department now uses a secondary Department of War designation (CRS). Canvas block: 4. Operations and process. Also 6. Data and technology, 8. Governance and

Business challenge

The challenge. DOD leaders said the department was not adopting commercial technology at the speed and scale needed (GAO). Replicator was meant to show that fielding in quantity within two years could be done and repeated, and to supplement more expensive systems rather than replace them (CRS, GAO).

How it was addressed. The department announced a two-year push to field thousands of low-cost autonomous systems and set up a steering group, a working group and a repeatable commercial process, with DIU running contracts. Funding came first from a reprogramming request and then from DIU's allocation (CRS, MeriTalk). A second line of effort was added in September 2024. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Who implemented it

In-house (In-house): Defense Innovation Unit: Served as executive secretary of the steering group and chaired the working group that implements the initiative, per GAO..
Commercial drone and software suppliers (Industry partner): CRS says DOD confirmed selecting several commercial suppliers and seven companies for software support; individual names are left out of this synopsis..
The department has released limited public information about specific capabilities and systems, citing operational security (CRS).

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: T9 AI in physical systems. Deployment: Not reported. Vendors and products: Not reported.

Where it was built in: Not reported. The sources describe fielding autonomous systems to the joint force and procuring software for autonomy and command and control.

What changed

Before: large, individually expensive platforms bought on long timelines. Replicator: quick commercial awards, a distributed leadership model across services, DIU and commands, and software and data integration as shared enablers, by the officials' account (MeriTalk). Whether acquisition became faster or cheaper is not measured in the sources opened. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

What it cost

Not reported

What it saved

Not reported. Funding reported by CRS: $300 million FY2023 reprogramming request, $200 million FY2024, $500 million requested FY2025; MeriTalk reports a $1 billion DIU allocation. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Governance and control

A steering group led the initiative, the inspector general opened an evaluation in July 2024, and members of Congress said it was difficult to obtain information. Public detail is limited by the department's operational security position (CRS).

S2 · Accountable owner · Evidenced
GAO says Replicator is led by the Deputy's Innovation Steering Group, with DIU as executive secretary; it has since moved to a new group. [2] [4] [5]

A1 · Safe use · Claimed
CRS lists DOD's Responsible AI Strategy and Directive 3000.09 as applicable documents and raises consistency with them as an issue for Congress. [1]

A2 · Human in the loop · Not reported
Not reported in the sources opened.

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Evidenced
A DOD inspector general investigation was announced in July 2024, and CRS says Congress could require reporting or direct GAO to review. GAO found DIU lacks a complete performance management process for its wider goals. [1] [2]

A4 · Vendor AI · Not reported
Sources name commercial suppliers but report nothing on controls over vendor AI. [1]

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
Not reported in the sources opened.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Claimed
CRS cites the Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of AI and Autonomy as an applicable commitment; compliance is raised as an open question. [1]

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– The former director of Replicator 1 says hundreds of systems reached the joint force with thousands more in production (MeriTalk, August 2025).

– Former DIU deputy director Aditi Kumar says the distributed leadership model fostered shared ownership across the department (MeriTalk).

– The Indo-Pacific Command chief said in December 2025 that the effort continues under a new name (Breaking Defense).

DID NOT

– The target was thousands by August 2025; a former defense official told CRS that only hundreds had been fielded by then.

– The Wall Street Journal, relayed by Taipei Times, reported the goal had fallen short and cited technical, cost and software-coordination challenges; Hicks said the programme was on track when she left office in January 2025.

– Breaking Defense says the effort drew criticism, including from lawmakers.

UNPROVEN

– The number of systems fielded: the department has not published it, and the figures here are officials' and a former official's statements.

– Whether acquisition became faster or cheaper: no measure is published.

– Total cost: CRS says little information is available publicly about potential total cost.

Aug 2023 Replicator unveiled as a DOD initiative to field thousands of uncrewed systems by August 2025 [1]

Jul 2024 DOD inspector general investigation into the initiative announced [1]

Sept 2024 Second line of effort announced, focused on countering small uncrewed aerial systems [1]

Feb 2025 GAO report on the Defense Innovation Unit describes Replicator and finds DIU has limited ability to gauge progress against its goals [2]

Aug 2025 Former Replicator 1 director says hundreds delivered and thousands more in production; Secretary of Defense memo moves second-line resources into a new task force [3]

Sept 2025 Wall Street Journal reports the target has fallen short and the work is moving to the Defense Autonomous Warfare Group [4]

Dec 2025 Indo-Pacific Command chief and the Pentagon CTO say Replicator continues under a new name, with a focus on larger drones [5]

Jan 2026 CRS updates its report: DOD announced its first acquisition under the second line of effort; one former defense official noted only hundreds fielded [1]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: E, No measurable effect. Proof: Partly proved. Level of change: Not graded.

No level assessed: band E, a target reported as missed with no published measure of changed acquisition performance. Officials argue the delivered systems and new ways of working were the goal; that account is not independently checked.

Graded E. Sources opened record a stated target of thousands and a reported outcome of hundreds, with no published measure of faster or cheaper acquisition. Officials describe delivery and process gains; those accounts are not independently checked. A case for band C would rest on those officials' accounts alone.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

This case shows the gap between a public target and what can be checked. The target was clear and dated, so the shortfall is visible; the department's own results and costs are not published, so most of the rest rests on officials' statements. The GAO finding on performance goals applies to DIU as a whole and is not a finding about Replicator. For a larger organisation, the transferable point is to publish how success will be counted before the programme starts and to keep reporting against it as the programme changes name or owner.

1. Set dated targets and publish how they are counted.
2. Report delivered numbers against the target at the target date.
3. Keep reporting when a programme changes name or owner.

Evidence

Score 2 of 4. Partly independent: a Congressional Research Service report and a GAO report on the Defense Innovation Unit, plus press reporting and officials' statements. Limits: the department has not published fielded numbers or costs, and the GAO report does not assess Replicator.

Evaluation method. Document review: CRS In Focus report updated January 2026, GAO report of February 2025, and press reports. No independent audit of Replicator outcomes was found.

Sources disagree. MeriTalk reports a former Replicator 1 director describing hundreds delivered and thousands more in production as a win; CRS records a former defense official saying only hundreds had been fielded against a target of thousands; the Wall Street Journal, relayed by Taipei Times, says the goal fell short. The accounts agree on hundreds and differ on how to characterise it.

Status. Folded into new structures: per Breaking Defense and Taipei Times the work continued under the Defense Autonomous Warfare Group from late 2025; CRS says the second line of effort acquired its first item in January 2026.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/us-dod-replicator-initiative

[1] Congressional Research Service: DOD Replicator Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress (IF12611, updated January 2026)
https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IF12611.html

[2] GAO: Defense Innovation Unit: Actions Needed to Assess Progress and Further Enhance Collaboration (GAO-25-106856)
https://files.gao.gov/reports/GAO-25-106856/index.html

[3] MeriTalk: Replicator Drone Initiative Earns Good Grades Two Years In
https://www.meritalk.com/?p=201407

[4] Taipei Times: US drone plan behind schedule, 'WSJ' reports
https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/09/29/2003844603

[5] Breaking Defense: 'It's alive': Biden-era Replicator drone initiative lives on as DAWG, looking at bigger UASs
https://breakingdefense.com/2025/12/its-alive-biden-era-replicator-drone-initiative-lives-on-as-dawg-looking-at-bigger-uass/

US Department of Defense (Defense Innovation Unit) website: https://www.diu.mil

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VERSION HISTORY

v1.1 25 November 2026 Method update: technology type set to T9 (AI in physical systems) and controls re-checked against sources; controls are not reported.
v1.0 15 November 2026 First published