

# UPDATE:Telecom Groups Protest US Commerce Dept Internet Data Requests

(Updates with additional background and comments from a Commerce Department spokesman and the state of Illinois.)

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WASHINGTON -(Dow Jones)- A wide-ranging group of telecom associations is protesting guidelines from the U.S. Commerce Department about a \$7.2 billion Internet grant program, according to a draft letter obtained by Dow Jones.

The draft letter is addressed to Lawrence Strickling, the department's Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information. It says the Commerce Department is seeking "granular data" that is "highly sensitive from competition, network security and public safety standpoints."

Strickling had been scheduled to appear before a House Energy and Commerce panel on Thursday, but that hearing was cancelled Wednesday as a result of unrelated developments on a health care bill.

The economic stimulus law funds an Internet mapping project to produce statewide maps about broadband availability in various areas.

In a broadband mapping bill approved overwhelmingly last year, Congress also directed the Commerce Department to make competitive grants to develop and implement statewide initiatives to identify and track the availability and adoption of broadband services. That bill also instructs the Federal Communications Commission to collect data on broadband consumers and compile a list of geographical areas that aren't served by any broadband providers.

The problem with the mapping project, according to the draft letter, is that the Commerce Department wants the entities collecting the information to provide sensitive or hard-to-acquire company data that eventually could be obtained by competitors.

Strickling met Wednesday morning with executives of the telecom associations crafting the letter to go over their concerns. Participants said it was a cordial discussion, where Strickling appeared willing to address their worries.

Commerce Department officials declined to comment on the draft letter, but a spokesman for the department's telecommunications unit offered this statement: " Industry, policymakers and public interest groups agree that a national

broadband map is necessary to better understand and improve the availability of broadband in communities across the country, and is an important step towards expanding broadband service to all Americans."

Signatories to one version of the draft letter include the wireless association CTIA, USTelecom, the Independent Telephone and Telecommunications Alliance, and COMPTEL, a group of competitor phone companies.

The National Cable and Telecommunications Association also was involved in creating the letter, but executives at the cable group later decided against signing on because they believed the conflict was premature, according to a cable source. NCTA executives were at the meeting with Strickling.

The largest phone and cable companies in the industry are members of these groups, like AT&T Inc. (T), Verizon Communications Inc. (VZ), Comcast Corp. (CMCSA) and Sprint Nextel Corp. (S). Smaller competitor companies like One Communications Corp. and RCN Corp. (RCNI) also are represented by the associations that have been circulating the letter.

The draft letter stresses that member companies support the stimulus law's broadband initiative and want to work with regulators to develop an understanding about where Internet networks are needed and how to build them in sparse areas.

"But this cooperative effort is at risk of being derailed if providers are going to be asked to deliver sensitive information unrelated to the task at hand and with little assurance that information will be adequately protected," the draft letter said.

States will play a big role in the Internet mapping project. Illinois, for example, appropriated state funds for a broadband map last year, but it also is seeking federal stimulus dollars to round out the project.

Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity spokeswoman Marcelyn Love said the data needs to be "stable" and "comprehensive" and include the various prices charged around the state for Internet access.

"Not only does it need encompass all areas or all regions or the state and all providers, but it also needs to give us a clear picture of the actual landscape here," Love said.