US government Internet traffic to be screened: report (Update)

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The Obama administration is planning to use the National Security Agency to screen Internet traffic between government agencies and the private sector, the Washington Post reported Friday, quoting Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, seen here in June 2009.

The Obama administration is planning to use the National Security Agency to screen Internet traffic between government agencies and the private sector, the Washington Post reported Friday.

The project was first initiated by the previous administration of president George W. Bush and was due to be set in motion in February.

The aim is to protect the government computer network from attacks from outside, the Post said quoting Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

Her department has been tasked with guiding the NSA in the fight against cyberterrorism, she said.

"We absolutely intend to use the technical resources, the substantial ones, that NSA has. But... they will be guided, led and in a sense directed by the people we have at the Department of Homeland Security," Napolitano said.

The plans risk re-igniting the fierce debate here about the protection of civil liberties, with the Bush administration accused of having tightened controls on telecommunications and Internet networks.

In the Bush-era, the NSA was given the task of carrying out unauthorized wire taps on telephone calls between the United States and abroad.

But Napolitano said the NSA would only be charged with looking at data going to or from the government system.

"Each time a private citizen visited a 'dot.gov' website or sent an email to a civilian government employees, that action would be screened for potential harm to the network," the Post wrote.

The daily quoted a Bush administration official as saying the program would focus on malicious content potentially in any note sent to a government address. "What we're interested in is finding the code, the thing that will do the network harm, not reading the email itself," they said.

Supporters say the program, part of a 17-billion-dollar security initiative begun by Bush, is crucial in an era where hackers have compromised government sites and even military addresses.

A pilot program conducted with telecommunications giant AT&T was held up for months because the firm wanted assurances it would not face legal recriminations, as it did under the Bush administration.

Toward the end of Bush's second term, the Justice Department gave the firm assurances it would bear no liability, but the Post said both parties agreed the new administration under President Barack Obama should issue a new certification.

Privacy advocates who want to strike a balance between security and securing civil liberties were given a classified briefing on the program by administration officials in March, the newspaper said.

Ari Schwartz, vice president of the Center for Democracy and Technology advocacy group, said he came away from the briefing thinking "they have a lot of work in front of them to get this done right."

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