

FCC, FTC seek explanations on phone location data

May 17 2011, By JOELLE TESSLER , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Federal regulators are joining the growing list of public officials demanding answers from Apple Inc. and Google Inc. about the extent to which mobile devices track the location of their users and store detailed histories of their movements.

The [Federal Communications Commission](#) and the [Federal Trade Commission](#) are teaming up to host a public forum next month to explore the benefits and risks of [location-based services](#). And they are inviting Apple and [Google](#) to explain themselves following recent revelations that Apple's popular iPhone and smartphones running Google's Android software have been storing location information.

Among other things, the forum will look at whether companies adequately disclose - and whether consumers adequately understand - how location-based services work and what privacy tradeoffs they may be accepting in using such services.

Consumers are embracing all sorts of location-based services being offered by wireless carriers, device makers and third-party developers, including mapping tools to look up directions, [social networking](#) applications to connect with nearby friends and concierge services to find local businesses. But privacy watchdogs warn that [location data](#) that gets stored over time can provide a window into very private details about a person's life. Databases filled with such information, they fear, could become inviting targets for hackers, stalkers, divorce attorneys and law enforcement agents.

In addition to Apple and Google, the FCC and FTC are also inviting wireless company executives, consumer advocates and academics to speak at their forum

Apple and Google are facing a lot of questions in Washington about location tracking.

Last week, a Senate Judiciary panel grilled executives from both companies following Apple's recent admission that the [iPhone](#) was storing the locations of nearby cellphone towers and Wi-Fi hot spots for up to a year, data that can be used to create rough map of the owner's movements. Apple also revealed that a software bug caused iPhones to continue to send anonymous location data to the company's servers even when location services on the device were turned off.

Apple has said it will no longer store the data on phones for more than seven days, will encrypt the data and will stop backing up the files to user computers. It also has fixed the bug with a free software update.

Google, too, recently acknowledged that phones running Android store some GPS location data for a short time.

Executives from both companies will be testifying at a Senate Commerce hearing on location tracking on Thursday.

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