

Senate leaders propose extending NSA phone records storage

April 22 2015, by Ken Dilanian

Weeks before a key surveillance law expires, Senate Republicans have introduced a bill that would allow the National Security Agency to continue collecting the calling records of nearly every American.

The measure by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and intelligence committee Chairman Richard Burr would bypass Senate committees and reauthorize sections of the Patriot Act, including the provision under which the NSA is requiring phone companies to turn over the "to and from" records of most domestic landline calls.

After the program was disclosed in 2013 by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, President Barack Obama and many lawmakers called for legislation to end that collection, but a bill to do so failed last year. Proponents had hoped that the expiration of the Patriot Act provisions on June 1 would force consideration of such a measure.

A bipartisan group of House members is set to introduce such legislation later Wednesday, dubbed the USA Freedom Act. But the move by McConnell and Burr shows that there is support in the leadership for maintaining the status quo. Congressional aides, who declined to be quoted speaking about internal deliberations, said the rise of the Islamic State group and the threat of extremists returning to the U.S. after fighting in Syria has shifted the political climate toward more tolerance of surveillance.

Critics denounced the move by Senate Republicans.

"Republican leaders should be working across the aisle on legislation that protects both our national security and Americans' privacy rights, but instead they are trying to quietly pass a straight reauthorization of the bulk collection program that has been proven ineffective and unnecessary," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat.

"For Americans concerned about government intrusion in their lives, the bill is a kick in the stomach," said Harley Geiger, senior counsel at the Center for Democracy & Technology, a civil liberties group.

The critics argue that the phone records program, which allows the NSA to hunt for communications between terrorists abroad and U.S. residents, has not proven to be an effective counter terrorism tool. They also say an intelligence agency has no business possessing the deeply personal records of Americans. Many of them favor a system under which the NSA can obtain court orders to query records held by the phone companies.

If no legislation is passed, the Patriot Act provisions would expire. That would affect not only the NSA surveillance but other programs used by the FBI to investigate domestic crimes, which puts considerable pressure on lawmakers to pass some sort of extension.

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