

Relax Laws to Boost Web Security, U.S. Officials Say

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By Andy Sullivan

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Bush administration officials called on Congress to relax open-government laws Wednesday to help fight computer crime, drawing a sharp response from a Democratic lawmaker who said the move would create a haven for corporate abuses. Computer security experts from the FBI and the Commerce Department told a House of Representatives subcommittee that the move was necessary to encourage private firms to share information about Internet-based attacks.

Although 5,000 companies have agreed to disclose information about Web site hacks, denial-of-service attacks and other online intrusions with law enforcement authorities, many are still reluctant to participate due to fears that freedom-of-information laws could expose corporate secrets, they told the House subcommittee on government efficiency, financial management and intergovernmental relations.

Information submitted to the government about attacks on business computer systems or other "critical infrastructure" would be exempt from public disclosure, and could not be used in any lawsuit, under sweeping legislation that would create a new Department of Homeland Security. Illinois Rep. Jan Schakowsky said the measure would enable companies to hide information about polluting facilities and other undesirable secrets.

"If a company wants to protect information from public view, they could dump it in the Department of Homeland Security and say, 'We don't want anybody to have access to it,' the Illinois Democrat said.

The House is expected to take up debate on the bill Thursday.

REPORTING NECESSARY TO DETER CYBER ATTACKS

Fears of an Internet-based attack that could debilitate power plants, airports or other vital facilities have increased exponentially since Sept. 11.

Law enforcement authorities say it is vital for these facilities to let authorities know when they detect an intrusion, so government can analyze the attacks and other businesses can defend against them.

Corporate trade secrets proved attacks, only 34 percent reported the attacks to law enforcement, he said.

"They want a simple statute they can understand. Without that many companies will not share information," Dick said.

Dick's testimony was echoed by John Tritak, director of a Commerce Department cybercrime office, and by computer security experts from the private sector.

The testimony drew an irate response from Schakowsky, who said that private industry was exploiting fears omes up for debate, and suggested that perhaps companies should be required to report Internet intrusions.