

Intelligence Chief Says New Policy Will Dramatically Boost Information Sharing

By Tim Starks, CQ Staff

As one of his final acts as the nation's spy chief, [Michael McConnell](#) on Friday said he would soon sign off on an intelligence information sharing policy that will result in a “staggering” increase in the amount of data available within the community.

McConnell, the outgoing director of national intelligence (DNI), told reporters he would put the finishing touches on the initiative in the next few days. Retired Adm. Dennis Blair is President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s choice to replace McConnell.

McConnell said the policy would allow spy agencies to access each other's intelligence databases much as Internet search engines such as Google allow Web users to retrieve data, with some limitations. When there is a dispute that cannot be resolved by lower-level leadership officials, the DNI would decide whether the information gets shared.

“I believe we failed the nation at 9/11 because there was sufficient information in the system that, had it been properly recognized, shared, and considered, we probably would have reacted in a different way,” he said.

Improved information sharing was one of the major purposes Congress had in mind for the DNI when it created the office as part of the 2004 intelligence overhaul law (PL 108-458). But lawmakers have not always been happy with the pace of the progress.

McConnell said there is a “constant tension” between information sharing and protecting sources and methods, such as the need to keep secret the name of a spy, but “as much as possible you want to share information.” Access to the information would be based upon a user's security classification and how deeply one goes from finished product to raw intelligence.

McConnell said he expected that as many as 98 percent of the disputes over whether information is shared could be resolved at a lower level, but “the secret sauce” is that the DNI will serve as adjudicator.

“The hard ones will bubble up to me,” he said.

The “biggest databases” in the intelligence community will participate: those at the FBI, the National Security Agency, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the CIA and the National Reconnaissance Office.

“It will be staggering,” McConnell said of the increase in the amount of information he expects will be shared.

‘Marrying Up to Technology’

Between the new policy and programs like Intellipedia, the intelligence community's version of Wikipedia, McConnell said that one of the keys to improved information sharing is to produce a set of policies that “marry up to technology.”

Despite hailing successes in information sharing and other fronts over his tenure, McConnell said that managing 16 agencies with sometimes competing interests has not been easy. It often took years, stretching back to before he took the job in early 2007, to implement changes like revising an executive order delineating each spy agency's responsibilities; overhauling the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA — PL 95-511); and instituting joint duty for the spy agencies much as it is in place for the branches of the military.

“It's hard,” he said. “Bureaucracies have cultures, and bureaucracies take, they have a personality and norms of behavior and expectation, and there's another consideration of a bureaucracy. It will defend itself or — and sometimes even redefine reality in its own self interest to resist change.”

He said he expected to be challenged by the Senate Intelligence Committee next week on what he did not get done. McConnell

said he would point senators to the law they wrote and the powers it assigned his office.

He said his successor would need determination and persistence to push through new policies, although he would be aided by Obama's holdover Defense secretary, [Robert M. Gates](#), a former CIA director who understands the workings of spy agencies.

McConnell said he wished he had gotten farther along on the issue of cybersecurity, "the soft underbelly of the country," and that Iran's nuclear ambitions would be one of the top issues for the intelligence community going forward.