

washingtonpost.com

White House Sounds Call For New Internet Standards

By Brian Krebs

washingtonpost.com Staff Writer

Tuesday, July 30, 2002; 5:51 PM

The expected wireless Web revolution may prompt the federal government to fund a redesign of the protocols that underpin the Internet, the White House's chief cybersecurity adviser said today.

Richard Clarke, the administration's cybersecurity czar, said it may be time to consider replacing the "creaky, cranky" 20-year-old protocols that drive the Internet with standards better suited to accommodate a flood of new wireless devices -- and the security holes that may come with them.

"We need to think a little bit about the underlying mechanisms of the Internet if there are going to be billions of wireless Web enabled devices all over the world," he said. "We have a positive obligation to be proactive in the development of voluntary standards and in funding the necessary research."

The White House is working with the private sector to draft a national plan designed to secure the country's most vital computer networks from cyberattack. That plan, set to be released Sept. 18, will include several policy recommendations to beef up wireless security, Clarke said.

Clarke said the companies that make and market wireless networks have an obligation to notify their customers of the security risks that may come with their products.

Wireless networks are cheap - about \$100 - and easy to use, but they are also easy to misconfigure. Companies that deploy poorly configured wireless networks virtually invite hackers to explore their internal networks, Clarke said.

"It seems irresponsible for industry to sell a product that could be so easily misused by customers in a way that jeopardizes their proprietary and confidential information," he said.

Vinton Cerf, the computer scientist who helped co-develop the protocol that allows computers to communicate with one another over the Internet, welcomed the chance "to rethink" the role of security in today's World Wide Web, saying he is similarly disturbed about the security problems posed by the proliferation of wireless devices.

"Dick is right to highlight this as a major issue," Cerf said. "The hope is that his words will stimulate work in this area so that the bulk of devices out there will one day have better security than they might have otherwise."

Nearly 81 percent of major businesses today use or plan to use wireless networks, according to a recent survey by the World Information Technology and Services Alliance and the Wireless IT Research Group.

Clarke acknowledged that government could be forced to foot the bill in fostering the development of stronger security and communications standards, given the current economic outlook for the telecom sector.

"We have an obligation to think about ensuring the health of the Internet," he said. "If that means we need to get back in and do more funding of research and development, if that means the federal government has to be the lead deployer of new technologies to see if they work, then I think we shouldn't shrink from that."

© 2002 TechNews.com