

National Geospatial Advisory Committee

Summary of NGAC Discussion on White House Big Data and Privacy Reports

Background

On May 1, 2014 the White House issued two reports on Big Data and Privacy. The first report was issued by a White House committee chaired by John Podesta, Counselor to the President. It is titled "Big Data: Seizing Opportunities, Preserving Values". Simultaneously, the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) issued a report titled "Big Data and Privacy: A Technological Perspective".

Given the importance of both these issues to the federal government's geoinformation management initiatives, and to the broader geospatial community, the National Geospatial Advisory Committee (NGAC) Privacy Subcommittee was asked to review the two reports for the June 2014 NGAC meeting. The following is a brief summary of the NGAC Privacy Subcommittee's review and the subsequent discussions at the June NGAC meeting.

NGAC Discussion

The NGAC was pleased to see the reports specifically address geospatial technologies (i.e. LiDAR, IR, SAR) as these technologies have probably been under-covered with respect to both Big Data and associated privacy issues. Until now, many of the key court decisions and policies seem to have focused on GPS and tracking technologies, not the broader array of geospatial technologies. Some believed however that the reports did not provide for separate consideration of data with explicit location codes, which broadly includes such technologies as wi-fi and cell tower mapping.

The NGAC agreed that some may have privacy concerns with the recent reduction of resolution restrictions for commercial remote sensing satellites in the U.S. Members of NGAC also agreed that there likely to be concerns with related remote sensing platforms, such as UAVs and small satellites (smallsats) with rapid revisit times.

The NGAC considered several specific points addressed in the reports. For example, given how the geospatial community collects data, the concept of "born analog" data could have significant implications. Efforts to address data fusion risks could also have a significant impact on government efforts, such as the Open Data Initiative and the Geospatial Platform. Moreover, since the geospatial community consists of government, industry and research/academic/ citizens that are both data users and data providers, laws/policies/regulations that regulate one segment will likely have an impact on the other segments. In addition, NGAC discussed how geospatial organizations could struggle with implementing traditional Fair Information Practice Principles (FIPP), such as notice and consent and data minimization, because of how geospatial information is collected and used.

The NGAC noted that there is a clear link between privacy rights and democracy, and that action is necessary to preserve constitutional rights. The Committee believes that these reports provide a short-lived opportunity to combine practicality, research, the law, and governmental and business needs with technological solutions to address these issues. NGAC expects that the issue of geoprivacy will continue to receive a great deal of attention in the years ahead. Some members expressed a desire to see more money made available for research on these issues, particularly since technological solutions can address some of the perceived privacy issues.

The discussion concluded with the members agreeing that there is a critical need for continued engagement between the geospatial community and policymakers/lawmakers/regulators on these issues. They noted that the FGDC can play a leadership role in such engagement and in educating the broader geospatial community on the privacy issues.

Additional Resources

Additional resources include Kevin Pomfret's "[Summary of Location Privacy in the United States](#)" and his memo "[Wake Up Call For Geospatial Community?](#)"

NGAC Geospatial Privacy Subcommittee:

- Chair: Doug Richardson (American Association of Geographers)
- Co-Chair: Kevin Pomfret (Centre for Spatial Law and Policy)
- Keith Clarke (University of California, Santa Barbara)
- Joanne Gabrynowicz (University of Mississippi Law School)
- Matt Gentile (Deloitte Financial Advisory Services, LLP)
- Bert Granberg (State of Utah)
- Michael Jones (Google, Inc.)
- Jeff Lovin (Woolpert, Inc.)
- Gary Thompson (State of North Carolina)
- Molly Vogt (Oregon Metro)

NGAC website (www.fgdc.gov/ngac)