



Lawmakers confront Obama on NSA

By Alexander Bolton - 01/10/14 06:00 AM EST

Lawmakers say momentum is growing to curb the National Security Agency's controversial metadata program after meeting with President Obama at the White House Thursday.

Obama declined to endorse any specific reforms during the private session with 16 Senate and House lawmakers but acknowledged the agency's surveillance programs would have to undergo reform.

During an hour and a half meeting, Democratic senators zeroed in on the controversial program that has allowed the intelligence agency to collect data on millions of domestic phone calls.

"Close to half the members of Congress think that the 215 program really ought to be reduced and limited. That for me shows real momentum," said Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colo.), an outspoken critic of the NSA, who attended the meeting. "We wouldn't have had that size of group, we wouldn't have had those sentiments expressed half a year ago."

Lawmakers said they expect the president to announce changes as soon as next week.

"I wouldn't be surprised a bit," said Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), who attended the meeting, of the likelihood of an announcement next week.

Lawmakers say it will certainly come before Obama's State of the Union speech, which is scheduled for Jan. 28.

"Many of us made clear our belief that the bulk collection of Americans' phone calls must end," Leahy said in a statement issued afterward. "This is consistent with the recommendations made by the President's Review Group."

Obama patiently listened to the concerns of Democratic and Republican lawmakers after promising to take action.

"He said he would announce reforms and restructurings and other changes that he thought were needed," Udall said.

Udall is pushing hardest for reforms to Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which authorizes the NSA to collect bulk data on phone calls made within the United States.

Leahy noted that progress on the reforms will likely be limited by disagreements dividing the Democratic and Republican caucuses internally.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) has vowed to kill legislation sponsored by Leahy and Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), which would end the bulk collection of phone records authorized under Section 215.

“We have differences of opinion among members of Congress but at least the president knows where we stand,” Leahy said.

Obama appeared to be well versed in the 46 recommended reforms made public last month by the Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technology.

One of the chief proposals of the five-member group is to end government storage of metadata and transfer the responsibility to private third parties, such as phone companies.

Feinstein bashed that proposal after Thursday’s meeting. She told Bloomberg that requiring phone carriers to store the records could cost them as much as \$60 million per year.

Lawmakers say Obama is more likely to take action on other proposals, such as adding a public advocate on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), who attended the meeting, said he considers proposals to establish a public advocate and to diversify the selection of the FISA court judges the least controversial reforms. Currently, Supreme Court Justice John Roberts appoints the court’s 11 judges.

“Some time ago ... he did a brief statement where he endorsed generally the idea that there should be an adversarial process and courts do better when they hear both sides,” Blumenthal said after the meeting when asked what reforms Obama may embrace.

White House press secretary Jay Carney issued a brief readout of the session, which he described as “an opportunity for the president to hear from members about the work they have been doing on these issues” and to “solicit their input” as his advisers near the end of an internal review.

An announcement by Obama next week would preempt a set of recommendations expected from the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board due in late January or early February.

The president met with leaders of the intelligence community and members of the privacy and oversight board Wednesday to discuss proposed reforms.

The other senators who attended Thursday’s meeting were Sen. Saxby Chambliss (Ga.), the ranking Republican on the intelligence panel, Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), Sen. Dick Durbin

(D-Ill.), Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) and Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.).

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), a prominent critic of the NSA, was notably left off the list of lawmakers invited.

The House members present were House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers (R-Mich.), House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-N.J.), Rep. Peter Visclosky (D-Ind.), Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), and Sensenbrenner.

White House Counsel Kathy Ruemmler met separately Thursday with privacy advocates such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Federation of American Scientists Project on Government Secrecy and the Cato Institute.

Carney said Obama was “fairly far along” in his review but is still “soliciting input” before deciding on reforms.

Justin Sink contributed to this report.