



Groups push to end NSA spying before June

By Josh Peterson

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WASHINGTON – The National Security Agency’s authority to collect the phone records of millions of people is scheduled to end on June 1, and a bipartisan privacy coalition of 39 organizations wants to make sure it stays that way.

The new coalition, Fight215.org, is asking Congress to end Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which requires phone carriers to hand over the call records of American citizens to the NSA.

While NSA surveillance has been in the news for nearly two years following the first disclosures from former NSA contractor Edward Snowden’s document leak, a number of Congressional attempts to reform the agency have failed.

For example, Sen. Rand Paul, R-KY, who [promised](#) during his announcement to run for the GOP presidential nomination to end the bulk collection program, voted no against the USA FREEDOM Act in Nov. 2014 because it would have extended the Section 215 program for another two years.

The coalition includes a range of organizations including the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union, Free Press Action Fund, DownsizeDC, TechFreedom, Fight for the Future, R Street Institute, and Human Rights Watch and the Sunlight Foundation.

Berin Szoka, president of TechFreedom, said in a statement calling upon Congress to act, “of course the NSA plays a valuable role in protecting Americans, but it must — and can — do that consistent with the Fourth Amendment, which bars indiscriminate surveillance of innocent Americans with no connection to national security threats.”

While the Obama administration has seemed open to NSA reform in the past, some Obama officials have been fiercely protective of broad NSA powers.

The Obama administration [unveiled](#) a proposal in March 2014 that would allow it to “meet its national security requirements” without the bulk collection of phone call records under Section 215, but said Congress would need to authorize the change.

In June 2014, President Obama's independent Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board [concluded](#) in its report on the 215 program that not only was it illegal, the program's importance had been overstated by the leadership of the U.S. intelligence community.

"We have not identified a single instance involving a threat to the United States in which the telephone records program made a concrete difference in the outcome of a counterterrorism investigation," the report said.

Not everyone in the administration is of the same opinion.

National Security Council spokesman Ned Price [told](#) Reuters in March, "Allowing Section 215 to sunset would result in the loss, going forward, of a critical national security tool that is used in a variety of additional contexts that do not involve the collection of bulk data."

Still, if Congress were to let the program sunset, Price said the administration would end the program.

More recently, during Congress' two-week Easter recess, members of Fight215.org petitioned staffers during a Capitol Hill panel organized by the R Street Institute to convince their bosses to end the program.

Patrick Eddington, a former CIA analyst now doing homeland security and civil liberties policy at the Cato Institute, told staffers that by the end of May, congressional leadership would most likely try to pressure to reauthorize the program "or people will die."

Panelist Sunday Yokubaitis, CEO of the Austin, Texas-based cybersecurity firm Golden Frog, also a Fight215.org member, warned staffers that creeping government surveillance was costing the U.S. jobs.

"After the NSA revelations, you could hear the giant sucking sound of servers leaving the U.S.," said Yokubaitis.