

CHINA TOPIX

USA Freedom Act Gets House Approval To End NSA Phone Data Collection

Bianca Ortega

May 14, 2015

In a bid to put an end to the National Security Agency's (NSA) domestic surveillance and phone data collection, the House on Wednesday moved to pass the USA Freedom Act.

The USA Freedom Act, which got a landslide vote of 338-88 from the House, has the power to end the government's phone data collection from the U.S. telecoms. USA Today first discovered the spying program in 2006 and former NSA contractor Edward Snowden re-exposed the surveillance activities in 2013, according to Wired.

One of the reforms being pushed by the USA Freedom Act is requiring the NSA to procure court orders from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court for phone data collection and allows telecoms to retain their clients' phone records.

Aside from that, the USA Freedom Act also requires NSA to access only a specific number of records with relevant search terms.

Although the USA Freedom Act has already been passed by the House, the bill still has to go the Senate for another vote.

The USA Freedom Act has divided civil liberties organizations in terms of support. At first, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) had supported the bill, but last week, it withdrew its support after the Second Circuit Court of Appeals declared the NSA's phone data collection as illegal.

According to federal appeals court, the Patriot Act's Section 215 never gave authorization for the NSA's bulk phone data collection. In connection with this, the EFF urged the Senate to return to a 2013 version of the USA Freedom Act which contains stronger reforms.

Meanwhile, the USA Freedom Act gained praise from Cato Institute senior fellow Julian Sanchez. However, Sanchez explained that while the reforms that the bill brings point to the right direction, they still do not address the full extent of phone data collection and domestic surveillance that Americans have discovered in the last couple of years.

"It's unfortunate, however, that this iteration of the bill dropped the critical 'superminimization' procedures that were present in the previous Senate version of the statute, and the law would be greatly improved by their restoration," said Sanchez.

The Section 215 of the Patriot Act is set to expire by May 22 and the USA Freedom Act supporters in the Senate have to pass the bill by that date.

The White House also supports the USA Freedom Act, as it says the bill allows the NSA to conduct surveillance and yet still preserve the American citizens' constitutional protections. Attorney General Eric Holder and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper are also supporters of the USA Freedom Act.

On the other hand, lawmakers against the USA Freedom Act say that curbing the NSA's bulk phone data collection will hinder the surveillance agency's function. They say it would allow terrorist groups in the country to proliferate.