

US authorities seek national license plate tracking system

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Federal authorities are looking to install a countrywide license plate surveillance system with the help of private firms, the *Washington Post* reported Wednesday. Later that afternoon, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson directed that the contract proposal for the program issued last week be cancelled.

According to the *Post*, officials representing DHS have approached several manufacturers of license plate recognition (LPRs) technology in efforts to set up a national tracking system that would provide state officials with the personal information of hundreds of individuals.

The system drew considerable alarm from civil liberties advocates, prompting the DHS to step back to review the plan it had initially promoted. “While we continue to support a range of technologies to help meet our law enforcement mission,” said Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spokesperson Gillian Christenson, “this solicitation will be reviewed to ensure the path forward appropriately meets our operational needs.”

The technology allows for the photographing, dating, and geographic mapping of personal and commercial vehicles by law enforcement officials, who are then given access to the database in which the vehicles’ information is stored. “This is like having your barcode tracked,” said Lee Tien of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Initially billed as being primarily for tracking immigrants and fugitives from the law, the program would have no clear guards put in place to protect the privacy of the millions potentially tracked by police sensors. “This is yet another example of the government’s appetite for tools of mass surveillance,” American Civil Liberties Union staff attorney

Catherine Crump told the *Post*.

Agents utilizing the program would be able to use a smartphone to take pictures of license plates that could then be compared against a “hot list” of plates in the database. According to the contract proposal, the government would be seeking “a close-up of the plate and a zoomed-out image of the vehicle.”

According to a DHS solicitation obtained by the *Post*, it would be left up to the private companies storing the data how long information could be held. One of the top LPR manufacturers, Vigilant Solutions Inc., holds on to its data indefinitely. There also would be no clear rules on what could be considered a “trigger” giving officials authority to search out a persons’ personal information. According to some estimates, companies like Vigilant and its subsidiaries hold over 1.8 billion files on citizens’ driving practices.

Nearly 20 states across the country have sought to curtail the usage of license plate tracking devices. Vigilant and its subsidiary company, Digital Recognition Network Inc., are currently being represented by the Jones Day, the firm hired to oversee Detroit’s bankruptcy, in a suit against the state of Utah for erecting such a barrier against untrammelled spying on citizens.

In a display of contempt for democratic rights, Jones Day attorney Michael Carvin defended the practice of the companies in a statement to the press, asserting that “people tend to invoke privacy and suspend judgment and skepticism.”

Spokespersons for ICE/DHS have attempted to downplay the threat to intrusion into people’s private lives posed by the program. “It is important to note that this database would be run by a commercial enterprise, and the data would be collected and stored by the commercial enterprise, not the government,”

Christenson told the *Post*.

These claims are meaningless, however, as the article points out that federal authorities would be given “24-hour, seven-day-a-week access” to the database. The *Post* also noted that federal officials have been collaborating with state and local officials in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with no protocol made public about the limitations of their license plate surveillance system.

News of the license plate surveillance proposal and its associated climb down are the latest in a series of exposures relating to US officials’ attempts to erect a massive spying apparatus. A report surfaced in June that federal authorities were assembling data for the creation of a facial recognition system that would contain the likenesses of over 100 million people. There is no reason to believe the DHS’s cancellation of the latest program is anything but temporary.



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