

FCC's Wheeler Pushes Internet Of Things Cybersecurity Plan

By Jenna Ebersole

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Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler has touted work at the FCC on cybersecurity and pushed a program for collaborating with other agencies and stakeholders on security challenges arising from 5G and connected devices, saying the transition to a new president shouldn't delay the work.

Wheeler wrote that FCC authority on the issue was part by the Open Internet Order in a letter to Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va. released Monday and responding to worries from the senator after the Distributed Denial of Service attack launched against domain name service provider Dyn in October, which used hacked devices such as refrigerators, smart thermostats and internet-enabled cameras to shut down sites including Netflix and Twitter.

Internet service providers have economic incentives not to take steps to address cyber risks, Wheeler said, and their work can also be undermined by other providers that don't take steps.

“Cyber-accountability therefore requires a combination of market-based incentives and appropriate regulatory oversight where the market does not, or cannot, do the job effectively,” the chairman said. “While we have had to postpone some of the next steps in this combined approach in light of the impending change in administrations, addressing IoT threats remains a national imperative and should not be stalled by the normal transition of a new president.”

Wheeler called for more interagency work and the involvement of stakeholders, combined with potential FCC action, to take on risks that market forces alone can't solve.

As part of a several step plan, the chairman said the FCC's federal advisory committees should work to develop standards to reduce risk and prompt adoption of new standards.

In addition, Wheeler said the FCC should identify data gaps in cybersecurity and issue a notice of inquiry on IoT cybersecurity. A notice of proposed rulemaking could consider FCC measures such as equipment certification process changes.

Wheeler said cybersecurity has been one of his top priorities and the FCC is “uniquely situated” to address the issue. The Open Internet Order enabled ISPs to take certain measures, he added, and the D.C. Circuit decision affirming it confirms FCC authority.

“These rules make clear that providers not only have the latitude to take actions to protect consumers from harm, but have the responsibility to do so,” the chairman said.

Warner said in a statement Monday that he applauded the response that validates concerns about the risk of cyberattacks made easier by connected devices.

“The FCC chairman confirms that internet service providers already have the authority -- if not the responsibility -- to protect their networks by blocking malicious and harmful traffic,” he said. “...I strongly urge the incoming Trump administration to make cybersecurity a top priority, because we simply must move forward with responsible new initiatives to better engage consumers, manufacturers, retailers, internet sites and service providers in improving our nation’s cybersecurity posture.”

Warner said in his October letter that the cyberattack proved the internet of things is all too easy to hack.