

IG Reports on Internet Data Collection

(As of March 30, 2001)

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2001, containing the Thompson-Inslee amendment as Section 646 of the Treasury-Postal Title, was enacted into law on December 21, 2000. The provision required the Inspectors General (IGs) to submit reports to Congress on each agency's data collection practices under the last Administration. Sixteen of the IGs completed their reports by mid-February. The remaining reports are expected in the next couple of months. A selection of the IGs' most interesting findings thus far can be found in the chart below:

AGENCY	SITES WITH PERSISTENT "COOKIES" ¹	DETAILED FINDINGS
Education Dep't	4	Four sites using unapproved persistent cookies found, 50% of pages collecting personal info lacked posted privacy policies, and nine pages were found to link to anonymous FTP servers collecting e-mail addresses without the user's knowledge.
Treasury Dep't	6	Six Web sites were found to set unapproved persistent cookies; 11 of 30 main Treasury Web sites did not have privacy statements; 19 Web sites weren't even on Treasury's inventory.
General Services Administration	15	Fifteen sites using unapproved persistent cookies found; on one site w/ persistent cookie, there was a third-party agreement set up in which the contractor owned all user data.
Energy Dep't	11	Twelve percent of sites (11) used unapproved persistent cookies; 30% failed to satisfy Federal disclosure requirements.
Interior Dep't	2	Although the final report has not been completed, the IG reported that two unapproved persistent cookies had been found so far on Interior Web sites.
NASA	3	Three sites using unapproved persistent cookies found. Due to NASA's failure to maintain Web site inventory, the IG cannot determine the number of NASA sites, who owns which sites, or whether the sites are in compliance with NASA policy.
Transportation Dep't	23	The IG identified 23 pages using unapproved persistent cookies (20 from FAA). Three DOT contractors were found to be collecting personal info on DOT sites.

¹The cookies found were "persistent" cookies, meaning that they would last a fixed period of time, potentially for years. According to a September 5, 2000, OMB guidance, persistent cookies raise serious concerns because they can make it "technically easy" for the agency to learn the complete history of users' Web surfing. Agencies were prohibited by the last Administration from using persistent cookies unless they (1) had approval from the agency head; (2) proved a "compelling need to gather the data on the site"; and (3) provided "clear and conspicuous notice."