



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We sought to determine what steps the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took to protect Personally Identifiable Information. We also sought to determine the extent to which EPA put in place a management structure over the Agency's Privacy Program.

Background

Congress passed the Privacy Act of 1974 to protect individual privacy. The Act sets forth requirements for Federal agencies when they collect, maintain, or disseminate information about individuals. Personally Identifiable Information is any information about an individual maintained by an agency – including employment, medical, and financial information – that can be used to trace an individual's identity.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2007/20070917-2007-P-00035.pdf

EPA Needs to Strengthen Its Privacy Program Management Controls

What We Found

Although EPA has made progress toward establishing its Privacy Program, the program needs more emphasis. EPA needs to set up a more comprehensive management control structure to govern and oversee the program. In particular, EPA needs to establish goals and activities for the Privacy Program and measure progress. Further, EPA needs to update its Privacy Program policies and establish processes to manage and make these policies available to responsible EPA personnel. Also, EPA needs to set up compliance and accountability processes to ensure adherence with key Privacy Program tenets.

These weaknesses existed because of the low priority EPA managers placed on the Privacy Program. A major loss of privacy information could result in substantial harm, embarrassment, and inconvenience to individuals. It could lead to identity theft or other fraudulent use of the information, which in addition to harming the individuals involved could be costly to the Agency and its reputation. Questions on EPA's management of privacy data could also cast doubts over the processes EPA uses to oversee protection of the confidential business information it collects.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the EPA Office of Environmental Information's Director, Office of Information Collection, establish goals and activities for the Agency's Privacy Program. The Director should also establish and use performance measures for the program. Further, the Director should update the Agency's Privacy Program policies and procedures, establish a process for managing compliance, and monitor compliance. We also recommend that this Director work with the Office of Administration and Resources Management to develop sample cascading goals and objectives that EPA managers can use to establish Privacy Program accountability processes. The Agency agreed with the report's findings and recommendations.