

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-642](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government helped to fund the development of the Internet but since 1997 has envisioned that the coordination of certain Internet technical functions would be managed completely by the private sector. As the Internet has grown, the Department of Commerce's NTIA has contracted with a nonprofit corporation, ICANN, for the operation of these technical functions. In March 2014, NTIA established core goals for a transition proposal and announced that if a suitable proposal could be developed, NTIA would let the technical functions contract expire and transition its oversight role to a global multistakeholder community.

GAO was asked to review implications of NTIA's proposed transition. This report examines: (1) the process of developing a transition proposal and addressing identified transition risks, and (2) NTIA's plans to evaluate a proposal. GAO reviewed NTIA's evaluation plans and identified frameworks for NTIA to use in its evaluation; reviewed transition documents; and interviewed officials from NTIA, other federal agencies assisting NTIA with the proposed transition, and ICANN, as well as stakeholders selected based on their technical, commercial, and academic backgrounds.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NTIA review relevant frameworks for evaluation and use applicable portions to help evaluate the transition proposal. The Department of Commerce concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-15-642](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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INTERNET MANAGEMENT

Structured Evaluation Could Help Assess Proposed Transition of Key Domain Name and Other Technical Functions

What GAO Found

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) announced that it would transition its oversight of the coordination of certain key Internet technical functions (such as the domain name system) to the global multistakeholder community if a suitable transition proposal were developed. In response, several steps were taken to develop a proposal and address identified risks. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which operates these technical functions under contract with NTIA, convened stakeholders from technical, government, business, and public interest organizations, among others. These stakeholders formed working groups with the goal to develop a consensus-based proposal they plan to provide to the ICANN board by late fall 2015. The board will then provide the proposal to NTIA. In draft proposals, working groups have proposed new post-transition arrangements to manage identified risks and hold ICANN accountable to the multistakeholder community. For example, stakeholders identified a risk that ICANN could be captured by a particular interest. To address this risk, stakeholders proposed changes that would empower the multistakeholder community to veto board decisions related to ICANN's plans and budget and to remove board members, among other things.

NTIA plans to evaluate the proposal against core goals, such as maintaining the security and stability of the Internet domain name system and the openness of the Internet. However, NTIA has not yet determined how it will evaluate the proposal against the goals. The changes the working groups are considering could create a new organizational environment for the operation of the technical functions, such as new structures, contractual obligations, and governance models for ICANN. Given the extent of these potential changes, GAO identified frameworks for evaluation that could provide tools to guide NTIA's evaluation.

- These frameworks incorporate leading practices to help organizations obtain reasonable assurance that their goals and objectives will be met or that they will meet certain requirements. For example, key components of one framework include the organizational environment, risk assessment, and monitoring.
- In prior work, GAO has considered such frameworks in relationship to accountability challenges at a variety of organizations. These types of frameworks could help NTIA evaluate whether the transition proposal meets its core goals, and could also be helpful in considering accountability mechanisms that are included in the proposal. For example, one framework's risk assessment component could help NTIA consider the multistakeholder community's efforts to identify and manage risks.
- These frameworks are intentionally flexible, so that NTIA could select elements that are applicable to the scope of the proposed transition.

Without a framework as a tool to systematically review the proposal and its various new structures and processes, NTIA may not be assured that its goals for the transition have been fully addressed and embedded over the long term.