

United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee
on Civil and Constitutional Rights,
Committee on the Judiciary, House of
Representatives

December 1989

COMPUTER SYSTEMS

Actions on OMB Recommendations for a Joint Lookout System



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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Information Management and
Technology Division

B-220280

December 26, 1989

The Honorable Don Edwards
Chairman, Subcommittee on Civil
and Constitutional Rights
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

An Office of Management and Budget (OMB) study, dated December 1988, contained five recommendations aimed at combining the automated lookout systems operated by the Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the Department of the Treasury's U.S. Customs Service.¹ On May 30, 1989, you requested that we report on actions taken or planned to implement these recommendations. These recommendations called for Justice and Treasury to develop a single lookout system based on Customs' Treasury Enforcement Communications System II (TECS II).

OMB also recommended that Treasury, Justice, and the Department of State establish a group to develop and operate the single system with emphasis on field training, participation, and feedback. Further, OMB asked the three agencies to institute more efficient and timely sharing of information, develop a work plan to appropriately reflect the economics and versatility of small computers, and determine the feasibility of establishing a data center to support the government's law enforcement and case management mission at the border. OMB included the Department of State in its recommendations because of State's involvement in processing aliens for entry into the United States.

Results in Brief

We found that State, INS, and Customs have taken action on some of OMB's recommendations. The agencies have (1) developed a joint lookout system known as the Interagency Border Inspection System (IBIS), (2) established a joint systems operating group, and (3) taken steps to improve the sharing of information among law enforcement groups. With respect to the remaining recommendations, INS, Customs, and State

¹Lookout systems are intended to help identify certain individuals whose presence in this country would be of interest to law enforcement agencies. To facilitate this process, these systems maintain records on individuals who may not be eligible or legally entitled to enter the United States. Agency officials use these systems to help decide whether to grant entry to individuals and their possessions.

are considering developing a joint work plan to use small computers and establishing a border data center.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We obtained information for this report from May 1989 through September 1989. Our work included reviewing documentation furnished by OMB, INS, and Customs relating to the study and implementation of its recommendations. We did not perform an independent review or analysis validating the study. We discussed the study's recommendations with INS and Customs headquarters officials, officials of the Customs Data Center in Newington, Virginia, where the joint systems group is located, and with the OMB official who authored the study. We also discussed and reviewed documentation on implementing the study's recommendations with Department of State officials.

Views of responsible agency officials were obtained and incorporated in this report where appropriate. Our work was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Background

The OMB study was initiated in October 1988 at the request of the Department of Justice, as part of Justice's overall strategic planning for lookout systems. The study's objective was to determine the best approach for meeting lookout information requirements at the border. In its study, OMB reviewed INS' Federal Inspection Law Enforcement System (FILES)² and the Customs Service's TECS II. OMB also looked at the State Department's Automated Visa Lookout System (AVLOS)³ because of its interaction with FILES and TECS II. State's system is a computerized data matching system used by passport office and consular post personnel to determine passport/visa eligibility.

In addition, OMB gathered information on selected aspects of the Justice Department's National Crime Information Center (NCIC). The Center, which is operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, provides crime-related information collected on individuals by criminal justice organizations nationwide.

²The Department of Justice request mentioned INS' National Automated Immigration Lookout System as the system to be compared with Customs' TECS II. Since INS proposed to replace this system with FILES, the OMB study compared FILES with TECS II.

³According to a State official, AVLOS will be replaced by the Consular Lookout and Support System in 1990.

OMB conducted the review under the assumption that a single lookout computer system would be more economical and efficient than two separate ones. In order to provide more effective and efficient support and decision-making ability for all functions, OMB also assumed that, in having only one system, the affected agencies would share joint system control, operation, and costs.

Accordingly, OMB made the following five recommendations in its December 1988 study:

- the Departments of Justice and Treasury should develop a single main-frame-based system for all primary lookout queries,⁴ building on Customs' TECS II;
- the Departments of Justice and Treasury should establish a joint systems group based initially at the Customs Data Center in Newington, Virginia, to develop and operate the single system with emphasis on field training, participation, and feedback;
- the Departments of State, Justice, and Treasury should establish a more efficient and timely connection between TECS II, NCIC, and AVLOS;
- a joint systems group should prepare a work plan to introduce a systems architecture that appropriately reflects the economics and versatility of small computers;⁵ and
- the Departments of State, Justice, and Treasury, in coordination with other affected agencies, should determine the feasibility of establishing a border data center to support law enforcement and case management missions of the U.S. Government at the border.

⁴Primary lookout queries is the term for the initial computer checks INS and Customs inspectors complete while processing people entering the United States.

⁵OMB informed us the intent behind the recommendation to submit a work plan was to recognize past INS' efforts in the area of distributed system usage and the technological trend toward small computers and decentralization.

State, INS, and Customs Actions Taken or Planned

Single System for Primary Lookouts

In response to the first OMB recommendation for a single mainframe-based system, INS, and Customs began implementing IBIS in April 1989. IBIS will allow INS to perform all airport primary queries where previously both INS and Customs executed this function. IBIS is an automated, joint-use system for providing lookout data for enforcement operations at U.S. ports of entry. The automated capabilities of IBIS are based on Customs' TECS II and presently incorporate certain features such as a name soundex search function, an alien identification card search function, and the use of machine readable document technology. Other enhancements are to be developed in the future.

The name soundex search capability is a method used when the spelling of last names varies. Soundex involves the use of a coding system that translates the English spelling of a last name into a four-character phonetically-based code. In this way, similar sounding names may be grouped regardless of spelling and then retrieved.

The alien identification search capability allows inspectors to check the system for missing and stolen identification cards or numbers. With respect to machine readable technology, State, INS, and Customs have jointly prepared a plan to develop and implement hardware and software that will allow IBIS to use this technology. The agencies are working to facilitate using machine readable documents, such as visas and passports, to enter into IBIS.

IBIS is being implemented in phases. The schedule for the first phase included setting up eight sites at U.S. airports in 1989. Nine additional sites have been proposed for the second phase, which began in fiscal year 1990.⁶ Beyond fiscal year 1990, future IBIS phases still need to be established for the OMB recommendation to be fully implemented. Ultimately, INS and Customs plan to have IBIS capabilities available at every

⁶Sites are listed in the order of implementation. Phase I sites include airports at: Detroit, Michigan; San Diego, California; Miami, Florida; San Francisco, California; Dallas, Texas; Boston, Massachusetts; San Juan, Puerto Rico; and John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, New York. Phase II sites include the land borders at Laredo, Texas; Calexico, California; and Nogales, New Mexico. Phase II airport sites include: Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; Honolulu, Hawaii; Seattle, Washington; Atlanta, Georgia; and Houston, Texas.

land and air port of entry. The Chief of the INS Alien Documentation Branch said that IBIS schedules may be delayed because of individual site problems, such as construction delays.

Joint Systems Group

In response to OMB's second recommendation, on April 19, 1989, INS and Customs created a joint systems group based at the Customs Data Center in Newington, Virginia. This group, composed of individuals with automated data processing experience, is responsible for the continued development and operation of IBIS. A staffing agreement exists between the agencies, with both INS and Customs providing two full-time and two part-time employees for the group. Although it has no inspection duties, the State Department has a role in processing aliens for entry into the United States; because of this role, it has also provided two employees for the group.

The joint systems group works toward establishing IBIS in accordance with guidance from the automated data processing and operational divisions for INS, Customs, and State. Policy direction for the group is provided by a steering committee, which is co-chaired by the Deputy Commissioners of INS and Customs. The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs is also a member of the steering committee.

In May 1989, an initial IBIS funding agreement for air port of entries of \$5.2 million was signed by INS and Customs. According to the agreement, funding is to be divided between the agencies. INS will provide the funding for equipment acquisition, installation, and site modifications. Customs will fund communications support and mainframe processing and storage. In June 1989, when land port of entries were chosen to receive IBIS, Customs requested reconsideration of the funding issue. In a June 26, 1989, memo from Customs to INS, Customs requested that INS consider assuming partial responsibility for funding associated with land port of entry communications. Customs officials said that communications costs were not originally estimated for land sites that did not already have computer communications and equipment. In addition, Customs anticipates capturing and storing alien arrival/departure information at both air and land ports, the costs of which were not included in its original funding estimate. No written agreement to this request has been made; however, Customs and INS officials stated that any funding differences are being resolved on a case by case basis.

**Field Training,
Participation and
Feedback**

Regarding the field training, participation, and feedback portion of the second recommendation, both INS and Customs officials said that these issues are being addressed through continuous correspondence with regional offices. On May 18, 1989, a joint memorandum was sent to INS and Customs field offices, describing IBIS and its implementation at field sites. These agencies' regional representatives have been made responsible for promoting feedback regarding the use of IBIS. In addition, these representatives assist in coordinating equipment installation, arranging for field personnel training, and offering input on which locations should receive IBIS. Regional representatives attended a conference in Washington, D.C., on June 20, 1989, that further explained IBIS. At that time, the representatives were given information on the OMB study and the subsequent program changes, including training programs and data entry responsibilities.

Sharing of Information

With respect to the recommendation that a more efficient and timely connection be made between TECS II and other law enforcement systems, Customs had already established a direct electronic link to Justice's NCIC. As of January 1, 1989, this link gave Customs immediate access to updated NCIC information for use at IBIS locations.

Currently, State Department records from AVLOS are provided to Customs by computer tape approximately once a month. According to the Customs Design Support Branch Chief, Customs will pursue efforts to install an electronic connection to the various IBIS locations, once AVLOS's successor—the Consular Lookout and Support System— becomes fully operational in 1990.

Other Recommendations

As of August 31, 1989, no action had been taken on two of OMB's recommendations. The joint systems group had not yet prepared a work plan considering the use of a small computer architecture and the agencies had not determined the feasibility of establishing a border data center. With respect to the work plan, officials from both INS and Customs stated that they are now using small computers in certain configurations as part of the overall IBIS effort and plan to prepare a workplan after they have gained further experience operating IBIS. Regarding the recommendation for a single border data center, State, INS, and Customs officials stated that they plan to begin a feasibility study in the near future with completion of the study during Spring 1990.

This report was prepared under the direction of Howard G. Rhile, Director, General Government Information Systems, who can be reached at (202) 275-3455. Other major contributors are listed in appendix I.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ralph V. Carlone".

Ralph V. Carlone
Assistant Comptroller General

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