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Story in Brief

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Web Portal Gets Vital Info to First-Responders

By Rob Margetta, CQ Staff

Planet Associates Inc. CEO Bill Spencer said his new software can help solve a major problem with the large amount of government computer data available: distributing it to the people who need it.

Spencer says his Intelligent Infrastructure PDF (iiPDF) system improves access and provides quick, up-to-date information for anyone within a company or government agency, from a manager behind a desk to a first-responder in the field. Unlike current data management systems, he said, iiPDF does not require extensive instruction. “Using it would require a day or two of training,” he said.

Through a new Web portal called “Planet evolution,” first-responders would be able to remotely log into networks running Planet Associates’ Infrastructure Relationship Management system, which consolidates and manages data.

After describing the information they need and choosing a template for how it is presented, first-responders could receive a portable document file easily viewed with Adobe Acrobat Reader software that contains floor plans, maps and other details.

“Say it’s a first-responder in an airport terminal, and a bomb goes off in a certain area,” Spencer said. “It would say what services, circuits, equipment . . . what would be impacted, what would have to be replaced . . . There’s a tremendous amount of information, including visual items, available. We asked ‘How do we get that critical information out to first-responders who need it immediately?’ ”

And the PDFs produced are not simple read-only files. Spencer said his company took advantage of a relatively new, seldom-used feature of Adobe Acrobat: its ability to read “layered PDFs,” documents with more content than initially meets the eye.

Spencer explained that clicking on a certain part of a layered PDF would cause more information to pop up and the documents can contain geospatial

data, maps, spreadsheets and 3-D building models. Conversely, he said, users can hide data they don't want to see.

Planet Associates said iiPDF is a response to several government agencies that have asked for such a tool, and that the Department of Homeland Security is testing the technology.

Planet Associates is the official Consolidated Management Database provider for DHS. Spencer said his company's work with the department involves maintaining network circuits for the Secret Service, Coast Guard and DHS headquarters and collaborating on the Secure Border Initiative.

The company also works with DHS' various agencies that serve as "stewards" for technology initiatives. For example, Spencer said, The Coast Guard is steward for e-mail, active directory and helpdesk tasks.

Spencer said that while DHS is already running Planet Associates' systems, the department would need to purchase a new license from the company to run iiPDF. But he expects DHS and other government entities to be interested in acquiring the new technology anyway because of the system's ease of use and ability to produce files accessible to any machine running Adobe Acrobat reader, a program that is nearly universal.

The iiPDF files are designed for computer screens but can be read on any Acrobat-enabled device, including phones and digital assistants running Windows Mobile, though Spencer said screen size would limit ease of use.

He also said iiPDF's usefulness goes beyond fieldwork. It can condense a large amount of data into a single document, so the system can help with analytics, including looking at the performance of a computer network or circuit's performance over time. "Then, if a circuit goes down, we know its effect on the system," he said.

In addition to receiving iiPDF data, users can highlight the documents they receive, add notes to them and send those modifications back to the database where the PDF originated, Spencer said.

One immediate use Spencer sees for the iiPDF system is automating a service Planet Associates performs for DHS. Whenever a hurricane approaches, Spencer said his company builds a report from National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration information and presents it to DHS staff. "Now, they'll be able to select a template that shows the storm without us having to run the report to them," Spencer said.

Planet Associates also does contract work for the Defense Department. The company said existing customers such as the Georgia Department of Transportation, California Polytechnic State University and the Greater Toronto Airport Authority and DHS are helping develop new applications for iiPDF.

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