Ajit Pai locks horns with Congress over location-tracking report

A recent report on carrier tracking has sparked a growing feud between FCC Chairman Ajit Pai and the Congressional committee charged with overseeing him. Last Friday, Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ) sent a letter to Pai requesting an "emergency briefing," following reports that the nation's largest cellphone carriers were disclosing consumers' real-time location data. But according to Pallone, Pai has refused to hold the briefing.

"Today, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai refused to brief Energy and Commerce Committee staff on the real-time tracking of cell phone location," Pallone said. "In a phone conversation today, his staff asserted that these egregious actions are not a threat to the safety of human life or property that the FCC will address during the Trump shutdown."

In his initial letter, Pallone had set Monday as a deadline, but it's unclear whether the FCC would be able to brief the committee on the issue in the future. The commission did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The concern over location tracking began last week, when *Motherboard* reported that T-Mobile, Sprint, and AT&T were selling users' real-time location data to third-party distributors. A reporter was able to pay a bounty hunter only $300 for them to track him down to just a few city blocks away. After the report, carriers said they would stop selling this data, or had halted the practice in the past, but those statements didn't quell lawmakers.

“[We] will continue to press the FCC to prioritize public safety, national security, and protecting consumers.”
Pallone cited this report on Friday, when he requested that Pai brief the committee on how the FCC allowed carriers to engage in this behavior and asked that they provide answers as to what the commission plans to do in order to protect consumer location data in the future.

The FCC has been heavily affected by the partial government shutdown, now the longest in US history. A number of consumer protection sites are down, and device approvals and other enforcement efforts have been suspended until the government re-opens. However, Pai and the other commissioners are not furloughed and can continue to work.

The shut down excuse didn’t fly with Pallone. “There’s nothing in the law that should stop the Chairman personally from meeting about this serious threat that could allow criminals to track the location of police officers on patrol, victims of domestic abuse, or foreign adversaries to track military personnel on American soil,” he said.

This is only the first spat between both the committee and the FCC now that Democrats have the majority in the House. No FCC oversight hearings have been officially scheduled, but Pallone has said that he is looking to hold more regular hearings compared to the previous Congress.

“The Committee will continue to press the FCC to prioritize public safety, national security, and protecting consumers,” Pallone said in today’s letter.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/14/18182797/phone-carrier-location-tracking-ajit-pai-congress-pallone-fcc