FBI seeks US-wide access to license plate cameras, wants “data in near real time”

The FBI intelligence division’s plan to obtain direct access to an extensive network of cameras could help expand that information sharing. As the FBI notes, its intelligence division shares information with a variety of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies.

Flock: Sharing is “opt-in” for local police

Flock itself temporarily provided access to Customs and Border Protection, Homeland Security Investigations, the Secret Service, and Naval Criminal Investigative Service as part of a pilot last year. Flock confirmed the pilot to the office of Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), according to Wyden. Flock says it has federal customers “including National Parks, Veterans Affairs hospitals, and military bases,” but that it does not work with ICE.

Federal attempts to access data could be limited by company policies. Flock says that communities using its cameras may grant data access to federal agencies, but that sharing with federal agencies is disabled by default. In March, Flock said it was “defining a new relationship with federal law enforcement,” including conditions to maintain local control over the sharing of data.

“Flock data belongs to the agency that owns the cameras. There is no backdoor into Flock. Any access is explicitly

permission-based and opt-in by the local agency," the company said.

We contacted Flock and Motorola Solutions and will update this article if they provide any comment.

There are also state laws limiting data access. California prohibits state and local agencies from sharing ALPR camera data with out-of-state or federal law enforcement agencies. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) said in January 2024 that dozens of California law enforcement agencies violated the law by sharing ALPR information with out-of-state agencies.

A Virginia law enacted last year imposed similar limits. The FBI's request for proposals said contractors must identify the location of servers where data is stored to verify compliance with state and local laws on license plate reader data.

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