

Giant hack may be first step in pursuit of bigger U.S. secrets

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A giant hack of millions of government personnel files is being treated as the work of foreign spies who could use the information to fake their way into more-secure computers and plunder U.S. secrets.

Federal employees were told in a video Friday to change all their passwords, put fraud alerts on their credit reports and watch for attempts by foreign intelligence services to exploit them. That message came from Dan Payne, a senior counterintelligence official for the Director of National Intelligence.

"Some of you may think that you are not of interest because you don't have access to classified information," he said. "You are mistaken."

Federal officials said Friday the cyberattack appeared to have originated in China, but they didn't point fingers directly at the Chinese government. The Chinese said any such accusation would be "irresponsible and unscientific."

"We know that the attack occurred from somewhere in China, but we don't know whether it was an individual or a group or a nation-state attack," said Rep. Jim Langevin, a Rhode Island Democrat and leading voice in Congress on cybersecurity. He added, though that it had "all the hallmarks of a nation-state attack."

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said he couldn't divulge much while the case was under investigation. Still, he noted that investigators "are aware of the threat that is emanating from China."

One U.S. official said the breach of data involving more than 4 million past and present federal workers was being investigated as a national security matter. That suggests authorities believe a nation was behind

it rather than a more loosely organized gang of cybercriminals. The official was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation and spoke only on condition of anonymity.

The breach was an embarrassing showing for the U.S. government's vaunted computer-defense system for civilian agencies — dubbed "Einstein" — which is costing \$376 million this year alone. It's supposed to detect unusual Internet traffic that might reflect hacking attempts or stolen data being transmitted outside the government.

A wide range of information is prized by spies — classified military secrets but also economic strategy and internal foreign policy debates.

This latest breach occurred in December but wasn't discovered until April, officials say. It was made public Thursday.

"The scale of it is just staggering," said Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. There's no telling how many more attacks could be spawned by the information stolen in this case, he said.

Although most Americans think of identity thieves stealing from credit card or bank accounts, the information about civilian federal workers has other value for spies.

"They're able to identify people who are in positions with access to significant national security information and can use personal data to target those individuals," said Payne, the counterintelligence official.

He said details from personnel files could be used to craft personalized phony messages to trick workers. Federal employees who think they're opening an email from co-workers or family members might infect their computers with a program that steals information.

Fake orca nearly drowns before it can scare Astoria sea lions

PORTLAND (AP) — When a 32-foot replica killer whale buzzed through the water to scare off hundreds of sea lions piled on Oregon docks, onlookers cheered. And then the dummy orca went belly-up.

The motorized fiberglass orca was brought to the seaside town of Astoria on Thursday as a sort of maritime Clint Eastwood called upon to deal with ne'er-do-wells, in this case sea lions crowding onto docks and making it difficult for locals to access their boats.

But the orca's first day on the job was a flop.

About 1,000 people cheered as the dummy whale — with its human operator inside — took to the water Thursday night. Jim Knight, executive director of the Port of Astoria, said sea lions that were crowded onto the docks became "deathly silent."

But as a cargo ship passed by, the phony orca started to list from the vessel's wake. And then the bogus orca capsized.

"Our crew from the port had to go rescue the operator so he didn't drown," Knight said.

So what did the sea lions think about this spectacle?

"They probably think it's dead now that it's belly up," Knight said. "You can't make this stuff up."

That was not the first fiasco for the dummy orca — which has been dubbed "Fake Willy."

The replica whale, loaned by a whale-watching business, was delivered overland on Thursday from Bellingham, Washington. After arrival, the orca's outboard motor flooded and a replacement had to be found.

Sea lion numbers along the West Coast have grown sharply since they were protected under a 1972 federal law. As water temperatures increase off the coast of California because of climate change, the animals have sought cooler waters to the north in Oregon. The sea



Joshua Bessex/EO Media Group

John Wilfer, the pilot of the fake fiberglass orca, is pulled from the capsized vessel in the Columbia River outside of the East End Mooring Basin on Thursday in Astoria. An effort to use a fake orca to scare off hundreds of sea lions crowding docks off the Oregon coast has ended, at least temporarily, with the fiberglass creature belly-up after it was swamped by a passing ship.



Joshua Bessex/EO Media Group

John Wilfer, the pilot of the fake life-sized orca vessel, looks out from an opening as the whale is moved into position Thursday in Astoria.

lions that have been taking over docks at the Port of Astoria are also attracted by bountiful runs of salmon and smelt in the nearby Columbia River, biologists say.

While the thousands of tourists who visit Astoria each year might find the sea lions amusing, many locals see them as a nuisance. Officials say the sea lions break docks, poop, smell, block access to boats and eat the fish on which the port's fishing industry and the town's economy depends.

The Port of Astoria has tried just about everything to keep the sea lions away — including beach balls, colorful tape, chicken wire and electrified mats.

The fake orca was outfitted with recordings of real killer whale calls, especially the "call to dinner" — usually emitted in the wild after they kill a sea lion or seal.

The orca capsized before the recording could be tried out.

On Friday night, the fake orca was on a truck heading

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— Jim Knight,
executive director of the Port of Astoria

back to Bellingham for repairs and to be outfitted with better controls to make it more stable in choppy waters.

It will be back in August when sea lions return to Astoria en masse for salmon-spawning season, said Terry Buzzard, who owns the orca contraption.

Knight, the port's director, said it's unclear whether a fake orca can fool Astoria's sea lions. But he is not conceding defeat. The way Knight looks at it, this whole adventure has drawn attention to Astoria's problems with the sea lions.

"We're excited and can't wait for round two," Knight said. "The battle is not over. Willy will be back."

BRIEFLY

Report: Social Security overpaid disability benefits by \$17B

WASHINGTON (AP) — Social Security overpaid disability beneficiaries by nearly \$17 billion over the past decade, a government watchdog said Friday, raising alarms about the massive program just as it approaches the brink of insolvency.

Many payments went to people who earned too much money to qualify for benefits, or to those no longer disabled. Payments also went to people who had died or were in prison.

In all, nearly half of the 9 million people receiving disability payments were overpaid, according to the results of a 10-year study by the Social Security Administration's inspector general.

Social Security was able to recoup about \$8.1 billion, but it often took years to get the money back, the study said.

The trust fund that supports Social Security's disability program is projected to run out of money late next year, triggering automatic benefit cuts, unless Congress acts. The looming deadline has lawmakers feuding over a solution that may have to come in the heat of a presidential election.

Brothers pardoned of 1983 murder

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Two brothers wrongfully imprisoned for three decades in the killing of an 11-year-old girl say pardons will help them move on "with not just a clear conscience, but a clear name."

It will also help them adjust to life on the outside with hundreds of thousands of dollars in compensation.

The governor's action Thursday qualified each of the brothers for \$750,000 from the state.

Family and friends of Henry McCollum and Leon Brown were jubilant in early September after a judge vacated their convictions and ordered their release, citing new DNA evidence that points to another man in the killing and raping of 11-year-old Sabrina Buie in 1983.

But their freedom has been difficult. Both men spent much of their adult life in prison. When McCollum walked out of death row, he needed help putting on the seatbelt in his father's car. At the time, he had never owned a cellphone and was unaccustomed to the Internet. Each man was given \$45 by prison officials when they left.

"I do want to learn how to drive. Because I wasn't able to do that years ago. But now I have the opportunity to do it," Brown said.

McCollum had been the longest-serving inmate on North Carolina's death row. His half brother Brown had been serving life in prison.

Ex-BP exec not guilty of lying in oil spill

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Friday's acquittal of a former high-ranking BP executive charged with lying to investigators looking into the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill marked the latest setback for federal prosecutors pursuing criminal charges in the disaster.

A federal jury took about two hours to find David Rainey not guilty of making false statements.

Rainey had been tasked, in the days after the Deepwater Horizon explosion, with calculating the amount of oil gushing into the gulf.



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