March 14, 2006

Panel: Feds can spur use of interoperability standards
BY Michael Arnone

The federal government must take a more active and informed role in developing open standards that promote interoperability among IT systems, a panel of experts said today.

Interoperability is something that the United States can do better than anyone else and is an essential competitive advantage in the international marketplace, said James Turner, chief minority counsel for the House Science Committee.

Turner spoke at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Interoperability Week conference in Gaithersburg, Md.

Interoperability allows data sharing across new and legacy systems and accelerates innovation by allowing more flexible and incremental improvements to those systems, said Karla Norsworthy, vice president for software standards at IBM.

Such standards also help create new solutions to business problems, Norsworthy said.

But the challenge is getting competitors to cooperate so that all their customers receive better service, Norsworthy said. That's where the government comes in, helping everyone recognize the cross-disciplinary nature of interoperability efforts and bringing experts together to establish best practices, she said.

A problem, though, is that "interoperability, at its core, seems easy but is difficult to put into practice," said William Jeffrey, NIST's director.

Another issue is Congress failure to understand open standards, said Olwen Huxley, staff member of the House Science Committee.

Of the 535 members of Congress, only about 20 have a good grasp of the technological problems that must be surmounted, Huxley said. She counted Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House Science Committee, as one.

"Congress tends to deal with interoperability [only] when people expect it to be there and it's not," Huxley said. An example was the inability of New York City fire and police personnel to communicate after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, she said. Firefighters and police died because they could not receive evacuation warnings over different kinds of radios.

Congress has done what it normally does when it faces a problem – throw money at it – instead of gathering people to find effective solutions, Huxley said.

It's a good thing that Congress wants to increase funding to solve the problem because there is an incredible amount of development work to be done, she said.
The federal government likes big solutions that seem to fix all problems, Huxley said. That plays to large companies' advantage but could marginalize small companies that are not involved in, or

don't know about, the standards process, she said. The smaller players must not be squeezed out, she said.

Participants in the standards-creation process should take time to educate federal lawmakers about the importance of standards whenever they can, Huxley said. That can help prevent bad decisions by ill-informed lawmakers, she said.

Norsworthy agreed, saying people involved in standards creation should help lawmakers understand that standards are an ongoing evolution, not a one-time revolution