



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on October 1, 2009

U.S. Opens ICANN to Global Influence

The U.S. Department of Commerce and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) signed an agreement on September 30 to give the international community more input into Internet governance.

ICANN governs the assignment of domain names on the Internet. It began in 1998 with the goal of facilitating the transfer of authority over the Internet from the U.S. government to the private sector. The process of the U.S. government relinquishing its control has gone on for over a decade, causing many foreign countries to complain.



But now the Commerce department and ICANN apparently believe the time is right for a change. Rod Beckstrom, chief executive of ICANN, declared in a statement: "We've hit our target after 11 years and we're now mature enough to move on to the next phase of our global development."

Back in 2006, Commerce and ICANN had entered into an agreement maintaining the status quo of U.S. government oversight. That agreement expires as of September 30, and the new, more open pact takes its place.

Under the new agreement, the U.S. government becomes just one member of ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC). According to Beckstrom, "the U.S government will have a seat at the table" along with representatives from 100 other nations.

"What it really means is that we're going global," Beckstrom explained. "There's no ... separate reporting to the U.S. government. All the reporting is to the world; that's the real change."

There are a few conditions placed on the agreement by members of Congress: the ICANN headquarters should remain in the United States, the deal should last a long time, and ICANN should remain accountable and subject to review.

Beckstrom has indicated that the current agreement meets all those expectations. He described the deal as a "perpetual agreement" and "fundamentally long-standing." ICANN will remain a nonprofit organization headquartered in California, and accountability reviews are scheduled to take place every three years.

Just what exactly the reviews will entail, and whether they made ICANN accountable to the Commerce department or to the GAC, was not clear from news reports. Nonetheless, foreign governments are expressing approval of the agreement.

Swedish Infrastructure Minister Asa Torstensson issued a statement on behalf of the European Union: "This is a significant positive move towards a new and more open 'working environment' for ICANN and this document provides a good basis for further improvements."



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This desire for “further improvements” may be something that will cause the United States to regret the agreement. Communist China, Iran, and other countries ruled by repressive regimes will no doubt seek better ways to restrict free speech over the Internet.

Even the simple fact that ICANN might be subject to more pressure to create new generic Top-Level Domains (gTLDs) — such as the .com, .org, and .net in use today — could cause headaches for businesses. A spate of new domain names would force companies to spend even more money to prevent their trademark from being infringed.

[PC World noted](#) on September 30 that “if ICANN unleashes a flood of new gTLDs, businesses worldwide might wish the U.S. had remained more involved.” And if repressive regimes begin to exert greater influence over the Internet, there will be even more serious reasons to wish the United States had remained at the helm.



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