Tap brainpower in Northwest

Federal money invested in our regional cybersecurity expertise could boost safety and economic development

11/17/03

It's no secret that wartime has spurred technological innovation in every era, from the canning of food first used by Napoleon's troops to the development of computer prototypes in World War II. The war on terrorism is now stimulating research and development in cybersecurity. As luck would have it, Oregon is positioned to make a real contribution to that field.

After Sept. 11, 2001, high-tech companies in our region were quick to follow a valuable piece of advice from Sen. Ron Wyden: Don't come to the federal government with a blueprint, looking for a federal handout. Come to the federal government with a working model of a product that fills a need.

These companies then got to work. With some pro-bono help from out-of-work engineers, they decided to fill a much-needed communications niche. They developed a state-of-the-art emergency-alert network, which has drawn national attention in the trade press. It is tied in to Portland's 9-1-1 system and is now used every day in the city.

Soon Oregon will receive more than $30 million in federal homeland security funds. Although it will be difficult to decide how to spend that money -- and many critical projects will vie for it -- high-tech investments, in particular, could have multiplier effects. In our view, expansion of this emergency-alert network should be considered.

Federal officials have said they're impressed by the network, and other states also are intrigued. We're sure it won't be lost on Gov. Ted Kulongoski that, by investing from $500,000 to $1 million in expanding the network, Oregon could simultaneously boost its own safety and its long-term economic development prospects.

The governor's cabinet of emergency advisers will meet Nov. 24 to mull its spending options. But first things first: This week, the emergency alert system must show off what it can do.

On Thursday, federal officials will be watching as a simulated emergency unfolds, involving many jurisdictions, a number of ports along the Columbia River and a shipping container carrying contaminated wheat, said Charles Jennings, chairman of RAINS.

RAINS, or the Regional Alliances for Infrastructure and Network Security, is the public-private partnership that developed the emergency alert network, dubbed RAINS-Net. This coalition includes 60 high-tech companies, the state of Oregon, several universities and many emergency response organizations. It also has a Washington chapter.

In recent weeks, RAINS has been working to tie ports and other emergency responders to its alert system so that the system can be put to a much wider performance test on Thursday. Although that isn't the only point of the exercise, Jennings understands that the exercise could have make-or-break significance for RAINS.

We should note that cybersecurity expertise in the Northwest includes not only a critical cluster of high-tech firms but also Portland State University. Although the National Security Agency has designated 50 schools nationwide as centers for excellence in this field, only a handful -- among them, Stanford and PSU -- are on the West Coast.

Oregon has an edge here. If the emergency-alert network comes through its test this week with flying colors, state officials should consider it ripe for their confidence -- and their investment.

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