

IETF Statement

Many of you in the audience know me, but for those that do not I am Bob Kahn, President & CEO of CNRI, a non-profit research and development organization in the Washington, DC area. For the better part of the past two decades, CNRI has supported and helped to nurture the IETF. Since its inception, following the creation of the IAB, we have been the only organization with administrative responsibility for shepherding the IETF activities. Along with ISI, which performs the RFC editor functions, we helped to turn it into the defacto standards body it has now become. This effort was a continuation of work that Vint Cerf and I had started at DARPA many years before that.

Since 1998, we have carried out the IETF Secretariat responsibilities under an ongoing contract with Foretec Seminars. The basic tasking to Foretec has been to support the needs of the IETF in carrying out its technical mission. I'd like to thank Foretec, those of you who are at this meeting and others that have worked so hard over the years to contribute to the ongoing evolution of the Internet and the IETF led Internet standards process

CNRI helped to create the Internet Society as a helpful adjunct in the standards process and to educate users of the Internet around the world. Having started the Internet as a government activity, I worked hard over many years to systematically devolve the responsibilities for the Internet to the private sector, and in the process, virtually all segments of the private sector became involved in the Internet

Many of you in this audience may not appreciate what is at stake in these deliberations. In my opinion it is nothing less than the ability of the technical community to continue to lead the evolution of the Internet, and if particular to permit the Internet architecture to evolve in the public interest. This is not about who runs the IETF Secretariat, or even about the most basic issues that still remain to be worked out in order for a restructuring to have a reasonable chance at success. There are serious issues that have not been addressed to date. Rather, these issues need to be worked out so as to safeguard what we have all worked so hard to achieve and to insure the IETF moves ahead on a firm and stable footing.

In 1998, when it became clear that continued support of the IETF would be possible with attendance fees augmented by contributions from CNRI and those that we solicited from others, we were able to continue the IETF support activities without the need for continued government funding. This transition to the private sector was accomplished without the kinds of congressional inquiry and Memoranda that were encountered in the setting up of ICANN. This has helped the IETF to grow and flourish.

At about the same time, a Memorandum of Understanding involving CNRI, ISOC and the IETF was negotiated to outline the responsibilities of the various parties. Although it was never formally executed, we have been adhering to the agreement ever since.

When the suggestion was first made to me by Harald and Leslie at a meeting last December that there was a perceived need for restructuring matters, they provided me with a copy of their Advisory Committee report. At the time, I outlined my concerns about the issues that needed to be worked out going forward. These issues were not CNRI or Foretec issues, but rather were independent of who was carrying out the functions or what the new organizational restructuring might look like. As a result of that meeting, I raised a number of important issues associated with the interface between the IESG and the organization carrying out the Secretariat functions. The issues included identification of necessary resources and funding to support the needs of the IETF on an annual basis, developing processes for staying within the confines of those allocated resources or to develop priorities or methods by which changes in levels of support and funding are achieved. These matters are all critical to resolve and have neither been worked out nor even discussed in any detail.

For the record, I want to say that CNRI recognizes the principal role of the IETF and its leadership in determining how it wishes to carry out its technical mission. In fact, earlier this year on the occasion of the INET meeting in Barcelona, CNRI proposed to help create a separate non-profit entity, and to empower that entity to continue the work of the IETF Secretariat as necessary, and to make it possible for others to undertake the work that had heretofore been carried out by CNRI in the public interest.

There has been no substantive discussion of this proposal to date. Rather, the only substantive feedback we received came last Monday, which was to inform us that a decision had been made to immediately establish an independent entity focused on IETF support functions and that such a new organization would issue an RFP for the operation of the IETF Secretariat. This new organization would then select the party to provide these functions and being operation by next January.

However, the devil is in the details. There has never been a substantive discussion of how to make a transition work and how it would operate afterwards. There is a report in preparation by Carl Malamud, which I urge everyone to read and comment on publicly. It will likely shed additional light on this subject. Your input at this stage is very important. If this new organization is to take the responsibility for managing the future work of the IETF, the steps we undertake over the coming weeks and months will determine how this evolves in practice. A major concern will be the composition of the board of directors and whether it is truly an independent not-for-profit organization acting in the public interest or not.

There have been crises for the IETF in the past and somehow wiser heads always prevailed and managed to sort things out. CNRI would like this restructuring to succeed, but it's important for the IETF community to play an active role in these deliberations and to fully understand the ramifications of the decisions that are being taken. I cannot see a smooth path ahead without a serious attempt to work out the issues that remain. There also needs to be time for the community to react to any proposals, including Carl's report (which I understand will be made available shortly after this meeting) and to comment on the inputs that are received. I appreciate the desire to move ahead without

undue delay, but premature action is ill advised and could have unintended consequences that would be adverse to the interests of the IETF community the Internet in general.

I urge this body not to rush to judgment on a decision of such fundamental importance without first assessing the alternatives and having an open and public discussion on how best to proceed.

This is a matter far larger than any interests CNRI may have. For our part, we will do what we can to maintain stability through what I hope will be a thoughtful and deliberative transition period.

In summary, this discussion is about the future of the Internet, how it will evolve in the future and the role of the IETF in leading this process. On balance, the IETF has made a substantial contribution in the public interest over the past two decades, but one should not assume it will continue to work well going forward unless we all, collectively, make the effort to understand how to make it work well in the future. Take the time to understand the issues and to ask the hard questions. This has not yet been done, in my opinion.

San Diego, California
August 5, 2004