Introduction: The Defend Trade Secrets Act of 2015

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Introduction: The Defend Trade Secrets Act of 2015

Christopher B. Seaman*

Trade secrecy is unique among the major intellectual property (IP) doctrines because it is governed primarily by state rather than federal law.1 At present, the only generally applicable federal law expressly designed to combat the theft of trade secrets—the Economic Espionage Act (EEA)—is criminal rather than civil in nature.2 In contrast, all fifty states recognize a civil cause of action for trade secret misappropriation, the vast majority of which have enacted the Uniform Trade Secrets Act (UTSA).3

* Associate Professor of Law and Ethan Allen Faculty Fellow, Washington and Lee University School of Law. I thank the Editorial Board of the Washington and Lee Law Review for their willingness to publish a Roundtable on this important issue. I am particularly grateful to the Managing Online Editors, Alyson M. Cox and Emily E. Tichenor, for their efforts in organizing and editing the contributions to this Roundtable.


3. UNIF. TRADE SECRETS ACT (NAT’L CONFERENCE OF COM’RS ON UNIF. STATE LAWS 1979) (amended 1985). Currently, forty-seven states, as well as the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, have adopted the UTSA, with some states modifying portions of the model statute’s provisions. See Christopher B. Seaman, The Case Against Federalizing Trade Secrecy, 101 VA. L. REV. 317, 329, 391–92 (2015) (listing the jurisdictions that have adopted the UTSA and its effective date in each jurisdiction); see also UNIF. LAW COMM’N,
The proposed Defend Trade Secrets Act of 2015 (DTSA) would substantially increase federal involvement in the realm of trade secrecy by amending the EEA to create a private civil cause of action for misappropriation.4 If enacted, the DTSA would represent the most significant expansion of federal law in IP since the Lanham Act of 1946.5 While the idea of a federal civil cause of action for trade secret theft is not new,6 it appears to be gaining increased support in Congress,7 at least in part because of recent allegations of widespread electronic theft by foreign actors and entities.8

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4 See S. 1890, 114th Cong. § 2(a) (2015) (proposed for codification at 18 U.S.C. § 1836(b)(1)) (providing that "[a]n owner of a trade secret may bring a civil action under this subsection if the person is aggrieved by a misappropriation of a trade secret that is related to a product or service used in, or intended for use in, interstate or foreign commerce"); H.R. 3326, 114th Cong. § 2(a) (2015) (same). As of November 23, 2015, the House and Senate versions of this legislation are identical. Thus, this Introduction will cite only to the Senate version.


7 As of November 23, 2015, the DTSA has eighty-two co-sponsors in the House and fourteen co-sponsors in the Senate.

In addition to a private federal cause of action, the DTSA would create a new ex parte remedy for trade secret owners authorizing “the seizure of property necessary to prevent the propagation or dissemination of the trade secret that is the subject of the action.”\(^9\) The district court may grant a seizure request if the trade secret owner satisfies a number of criteria, including demonstrating (1) that it is likely to establish the existence of a trade secret and misappropriation by the party against whom the seizure is ordered; (2) that “immediate and irreparable injury will occur” absent a seizure; (3) that the balance of harms weighs in favor of the trade secret owner; and (4) that a temporary restraining order under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 65(b) would be inadequate because the relevant party “would evade, avoid, or otherwise not comply with such an order.”\(^10\) If a seizure order is granted on an ex parte basis, the district court would be required to conduct a hearing to determine whether the order should be modified or dissolved within seven days after its issuance.\(^11\) The DTSA would also create a cause of action for a party “who suffers damage by reason of a wrongful or excessive seizure.”\(^12\)

The DTSA would permit trade secret owners to seek injunctive relief “to prevent actual or threatened
misappropriation. . . on such terms as the court deems reasonable,” provided that the injunction “does not prevent a person from accepting an offer of employment under conditions that avoid actual or threatened misappropriation.” It also would authorize the award of monetary damages for the actual loss caused by the misappropriation and the misappropriator’s unjust enrichment, or—in the alternative—a reasonable royalty for the misappropriator’s disclosure or use of the trade secret. In addition, punitive damages up to three times the amount of compensatory damages and reasonable attorney’s fees may be granted by the court for willful and malicious misappropriation.

The DTSA would adopt a definition of misappropriation that is substantively similar to the UTSA. It also would impose a five-year statute of limitations for the filing of misappropriation claims, which is longer than the limitations period for most state trade secret laws. Original jurisdiction for misappropriation claims under the DTSA would lie in the district courts. Finally, the DTSA would not preempt any other federal or state laws.

The DTSA was introduced simultaneously in the House and Senate on July 29, 2015 and is currently pending before the Judiciary Committee in both chambers. Supporters of the bill include a number of high-technology and manufacturing firms,

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13. Id. (proposed for codification at 18 U.S.C. § 1836(b)(3)(A)(i)).
15. Id. (proposed for codification at 18 U.S.C. § 1836(b)(3)(C)–(D)). The DTSA also would authorize an award of reasonable attorney’s fees if a claim of misappropriation was made in bad faith or if a motion to terminate an injunction was made or opposed in bad faith. Id.
17. S. 1890 § 2(a) (proposed for codification at 18 U.S.C. § 1836(d)).
18. See Seaman, supra note 3, at 393–94 app. B.
19. S. 1890 § 2(a) (proposed for codification at 18 U.S.C. § 1836(c)).
20. See id. § 2(f) (“Nothing in the amendment made by this section shall be construed to modify the rules of construction under section 1838 of title 18, United States Code, or to preempt any other provision of law.”).
21. See Letter from Ass’n of Glob. Automakers, Inc. et al., to the Hon. Orrin Hatch et al. (July 29, 2015), reprinted in 161 Cong. Rec. S7253 (Oct. 8, 2015) (listing support for the bill from 30 organizations and companies, including Boeing, Caterpillar, General Electric, IBM, Intel, Johnson & Johnson, Nike,
the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Section of Intellectual Property Law of the American Bar Association. Opponents of the DTSA include numerous law professors who teach, research, and write in the area of intellectual property law.

This Roundtable is intended to evaluate the DTSA from a variety of perspectives. It includes contributions from both experienced IP practitioners and respected legal academics. John Marsh, a trade secret lawyer at Hahn Loeser & Parks LLP and Chair of the American Intellectual Property Law Association’s (AIPLA) Trade Secret Law Committee, argues in favor of the DTSA’s enactment. Representing a different viewpoint, Stephen Y. Chow, an IP attorney at Burns & Levinson LLP and member of the American Law Institute, questions whether the DTSA is necessary and ultimately concludes that it is “not ready for prime

Pfizer, Procter & Gamble, and 3M).

22. Id.


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time." Eric Goldman, Professor of Law and Co-Director of the High Tech Law Institute at Santa Clara University School of Law and author of the widely-read Technology & Marketing Law Blog, critiques the ex parte seizure provision of the DTSA and argues that it should be removed from the bill. David S. Levine, Associate Professor of Law at Elon University School of Law and Affiliate Scholar at the Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School, addresses cybersecurity, the "reasonable efforts" standard for trade secret protection, and the DTSA. Sharon K. Sandeen, Professor of Law at Hamline University and co-author of Cases and Materials on Trade Secret Law, the leading textbook on the subject, contends that the marginal benefits of the DTSA are significantly outweighed by its likely costs, particularly by increases in both the anticipated volume and complexity of litigation in federal court that would occur in the DTSA's wake. All of these contributions enrich the nascent literature regarding this important legislation.