

## ECS III: Loaded with technology

### Security, IP telephony and mobile PCs are expected to be among the hot sellers

BY JOHN MOORE  
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To say the Electronic Commodity Store III program offers greater breadth than its predecessors may be something of an understatement.

ECS III, awarded in late November 2002, expands beyond the typical mix of desktop computers, servers and accessories, with contractors planning to offer everything from handhelds to high-end networking gear. One prime contractor on the National Institutes of Health-sponsored vehicle said its contract will include 400,000 line items.

Agencies that still can't find what they are looking for on a given contract can take advantage of the NIH vehicle's flexible technology "refresh" policy. Vendors say they can add products on the fly, noting the ease-of-use factor associated with previous ECS contracts. The NIH Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center manages the tech-laden ECS program.

But NITAAC and industry officials emphasize that ECS III is not intended to be a widget fest. The program's 66 prime contractors and numerous technology suppliers are expected to offer integrated applications, not just boxes. ECS III features a services component that should boost the sophistication of solutions available through the contract. Indeed, technical innovation is expected to be among ECS III's attractions.

"NITAAC has smaller niche companies with new, emerging products," said Olga Lawrence, assistant project manager with the Army's Small Computer Program. That program has used NITAAC contracts in the past to augment its own contracts; the group plans to use ECS III as well.

Robert Williams, president of A&T Systems Inc., believes ECS III has moved up a notch in procurement circles, expanding beyond product-based sales.

"Up until now, you would only really compare ECS to NASA's" Scientific and Engineering Workstation Procurement, he said. "Now I think you have to look at ECS in the pantheon of acquisitions vehicles that would include the variety of [General Services Administration]-based vehicles and other large governmentwide acquisitions." A&T Systems is an ECS III prime contractor.

ECS III advocates say the program's solutions approach will appeal to agencies that are focusing more on security since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. NITAAC seeks to establish ECS III as the preferred vehicle for homeland security-related IT purchases.

Elmer Sembly, NITAAC's communications director, said the contracting office began to address security requirements through Image World 2nd, an NIH contract vehicle originally focused on electronic imaging. But when NITAAC officials decided to put ECS II out for bid again, they decided to "address homeland security needs on a broad spectrum," Sembly said.

David Nadler, a partner with Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky LLP, said agencies will look to governmentwide acquisition contracts (GWACs) such as ECS III to meet their needs — including homeland security requirements. For ECS III, success will depend on the products it offers and whether those products are offered through other vehicles, he said.

### Hot Technologies

Security products will be among the hot sellers on ECS III, say most vendors.

"Needless to say, there's a great deal of interest in biometric technologies and security products," said Alan Bechara, president and general manager of PC Mall Gov, an ECS III prime contractor. Technologies that reflect the homeland security theme include data encryption, network security and biometrics on wireless products such as laptops, he said.

Jim Shanks, president of CDW Government Inc., also anticipates demand for wireless security and "anything that can help secure remote forces."

Phoenix Systems Corp., new to the ECS program, plans to capitalize on its experience in securing wireless networks. Prior to ECS III, the small, disadvantaged business teamed with Federated IT and won a \$3.4 million pact to provide wireless security under the Department of Veterans Affairs' Procurement of Computer Hardware and Software-2 program.

Overall, "the health and human services area appears to be one of the areas that can benefit by utilizing this technology," said Michael Franco, president of Phoenix Systems.

In addition to wireless security, wireless devices themselves are expected to move on ECS III. "We plan to use this as a showcase for tablet PCs and new [Hewlett-Packard Co.] iPaq's," said Alan Lawrence, director of strategic programs for HP's federal operations. HP is among the vendors marketing tablet PCs, industry's latest attempt to popularize pen-based computing. HP's expanded iPaq line, meanwhile, includes the model 5450, which features a biometric fingerprint reader and 802.11b and Bluetooth wireless communications.

Although HP holds an ECS III prime contract, the company expects to do 90 percent of its business through small-business contract holders, according to Lawrence.

"We're looking toward mobile devices, integrated communication devices and wireless networks," said Jack Littley, senior vice president of program and information services at GTSI Corp. "I think those kinds of purchases will show up more and more on ECS III."

Other vendors expect networking products to be a key ECS III thrust. "A lot of the contracts out there have desktops and low-end routers," said Jeff Moore, director of business development at Sterling Computers Inc., an 8(a) business and ECS III prime contractor. "This one...entails some of those high-end items." Sterling offers enterprise-class network technology from vendors such as Cisco Systems Inc.

In the networking category, voice over IP may be a hot spot on ECS III, according to vendors.

"A lot of people are upgrading networks and going to" voice over IP, said Tom Flynn, director of partners and programs at ECS III contractor PlanetGov Inc. He said agencies are looking at voice over IP to cut down on telecommunications costs and support new applications. ECS III, he said, could emerge as a key vehicle for marketing voice-over-IP solutions.

### At Your Service

ECS III — unlike its predecessors — includes a services component, which could pave the way for more complex solutions.

Take IP telephony, for example. Les Rosenthal, vice president of sales and operations at NetStar-1 Inc., said voice over IP "requires a lot of different skills to make it happen. A program like ECS III provides the services to analyze and prepare" a customer's network for a voice-over-IP deployment. NetStar-1, which recently launched, is an ECS III prime contractor.

Mike Bruemmer, director of sales for the civilian government at Dell Computer Corp., cited the inclusion of services as the biggest change with ECS III. He envisions the ability to offer services such as IT architecture consulting and switching agency e-mail systems to Microsoft Corp.'s Exchange platform. "There is going to be a lot more solution opportunity," he said.

Product-oriented contractors are partnering with others to bolster their service offerings. For example, Dell's service partners include TechSolve Inc. and World Wide Technology Inc., Bruemmer said. Reseller CDW-G, meanwhile, is partnering with systems integration giant Science Applications International Corp.

Alliances are forming among smaller contractors as well. ECS III prime contractor Converge Networks Corp., a firm launched last year, is teaming with three other companies, including Network Technology Inc., a Memphis, Tenn.-based 8(a) company. Network Technology provides installation, systems integration and management consulting services, said Eddy Gill, president of the company.

Gill said ECS III makes it easier for solution providers to bundle products and services. "ECS II was not so services oriented," she said.

### **Homeland Security's Home?**

It also remains to be seen whether ECS III will emerge as a marketplace for homeland security wares.

Littley called ECS III "the perfect type of vehicle for something like the Homeland Security Department." He said the department needs a vehicle that will allow it to move quickly, instead of taking the time to build one from scratch.

Some market watchers think the new department may eventually opt to have its own IT contract. But ECS III can serve "as a resource until they decide to come out with their own vehicle," Littley said.

NetStar-1's Rosenthal believes it may take a while for ECS III to emerge as a homeland security program. The program will start as a more traditional IT vehicle and later gain traction in homeland security as it builds a reputation, he said. "It's a challenge for any agency to have a GWAC become known in any particular technology," he said.

But that's the challenge NITAAC and its 66 prime contractors will have to address.

Moore is a freelance writer based in Syracuse, N.Y.