REQUEST UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

July 7, 2014

Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street NW
Room 9026
Washington, DC 20503

BY ELECTRONIC MAIL: OMBFOIA@omb.eop.gov

Re: Request for Certain Agency Records — Michael Fitzpatrick “EPA” emails

To OMB Freedom of Information Officer,

On behalf of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), please consider this request pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 et seq. CEI is a non-profit public policy institute organized under section 501(c)3 of the tax code and with research, investigative journalism and publication functions, as well as a transparency initiative seeking public records relating to environmental and energy policy and how policymakers use public resources, all of which include broad dissemination of public information obtained under open records and freedom of information laws.
Please provide us, within twenty working days,\(^1\) copies of all of former Office of Management and Budget, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs employee Michael Fitzpatrick’s emails a) with “EPA” in the To or From fields (including cc: and/or bcc:), Subject field, or the email body, b) which were sent or received during the approximately eleven-month period January 20, 2009, through December 31, 2009, inclusive.

We agree to pay up to $150.00 for responsive records in the event OMB denies our fee waiver request detailed, infra.

OMB Must Err on the Side of Disclosure


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\(^1\) *See Citizens for Responsible Ethics in Washington v. Federal Election Commission*, 711 F.3d 180, 186 (D.C. Cir. 2013), and discussion at pages 20-21, infra.
These disclosure obligations are to be accorded added weight in light of the recent Presidential directive to executive agencies to comply with FOIA to the fullest extent of the law. *Presidential Memorandum For Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies*, 75 F.R. § 4683, 4683 (Jan. 21, 2009). As the President emphasized, “a democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency,” and “the Freedom of Information Act… is the most prominent expression of a profound national commitment to ensuring open Government.” Accordingly, the President has directed that FOIA “be administered with a clear presumption: In the face of doubt, openness prevails” and that a “presumption of disclosure should be applied to all decisions involving FOIA.”

**Request for Fee Waiver**

This discussion is detailed as a result of our recent experience of federal agencies improperly using denial of fee waivers to impose an economic barrier to access, an improper means of delaying or otherwise denying access to public records to groups whose requests are, apparently, unwelcome, including and particularly CEI. This is also despite our history of regularly obtaining fee waivers.

**Disclosure would substantially contribute to the public at large’s understanding of governmental operations or activities, on a matter of demonstrable public interest.**

CEI’s principal request for waiver or reduction of all costs is pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) (“Documents shall be furnished without any charge... if disclosure of
the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester”).

CEI does not seek these records for a commercial purpose. Requester is organized and recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as 501(c)3 educational organization. As such, requester also has no commercial interest possible in these records. If no commercial interest exists, an assessment of that non-existent interest is not required in any balancing test with the public’s interest.


The public interest fee waiver provision “is to be liberally construed in favor of waivers for noncommercial requesters.” McClellan Ecological Seepage Situation v. Carlucci, 835 F. 2d 1284, 2184 (9th Cir. 1987). The Requester need not demonstrate that the records would contain any particular evidence, such as of misconduct. Instead, the question is whether the requested information is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government, period. See Judicial Watch v. Rosotti, 326 F. 3d 1309, 1314 (D.C. Cir 2003).

FOIA is aimed in large part at promoting active oversight roles of watchdog public advocacy groups. “The legislative history of the fee waiver provision reveals that it was added to FOIA ‘in an attempt to prevent government agencies from using high fees


Requester’s ability -- as well as many nonprofit organizations, educational institutions and news media that will benefit from disclosure -- to utilize FOIA depends

\[\text{This was grounded in the recognition that the two plaintiffs in that merged appeal were, like Requester, public interest non-profits that “rely heavily and frequently on FOIA and its fee waiver provision to conduct the investigations that are essential to the performance of certain of their primary institutional activities -- publicizing governmental choices and highlighting possible abuses that otherwise might go undisputed and thus unchallenged. These investigations are the necessary prerequisites to the fundamental publicizing and mobilizing functions of these organizations. Access to information through FOIA is vital to their organizational missions.” Better Gov’t v. State. They therefore, like Requester, “routinely make FOIA requests that potentially would not be made absent a fee waiver provision”, requiring the court to consider the “Congressional determination that such constraints should not impede the access to information for appellants such as these.” Id.}\]
on their ability to obtain fee waivers. For this reason, “Congress explicitly recognized the
importance and the difficulty of access to governmental documents for such typically
under-funded organizations and individuals when it enacted the ‘public benefit’ test for
FOIA fee waivers. This waiver provision was added to FOIA ‘in an attempt to prevent
government agencies from using high fees to discourage certain types of requesters and
requests,’ in a clear reference to requests from journalists, scholars and, most importantly
for our purposes, nonprofit public interest groups. Congress made clear its intent that fees
should not be utilized to discourage requests or to place obstacles in the way of such
disclosure, forbidding the use of fees as ‘‘toll gates’’ on the public access road to

As the Better Government court also recognized, public interest groups employ
FOIA for activities “essential to the performance of certain of their primary institutional
activities -- publicizing governmental choices and highlighting possible abuses that
otherwise might go undisputed and thus unchallenged. These investigations are the
necessary prerequisites to the fundamental publicizing and mobilizing functions of these
organizations. Access to information through FOIA is vital to their organizational
missions.” Id.

Congress enacted FOIA clearly intending that “fees should not be used for the
purpose of discouraging requests for information or as obstacles to disclosure of
fees as a means of withholding records from a FOIA requester constitutes improper withholding. *Id.* at 874.

Therefore, “insofar as… [agency] guidelines and standards in question act to discourage FOIA requests and to impede access to information for precisely those groups Congress intended to aid by the fee waiver provision, they inflict a continuing hardship on the non-profit public interest groups who depend on FOIA to supply their lifeblood -- information.” *Better Gov’t v. State* (internal citations omitted). The courts therefore will not permit such application of FOIA requirements that “‘chill’ the ability and willingness of their organizations to engage in activity that is not only voluntary, but that Congress explicitly wished to encourage.” *Id.* As such, agency implementing regulations may not facially or in practice interpret FOIA’s fee waiver provision in a way creating a fee barrier for Requester.

Courts have noted FOIA’s legislative history to find that a fee waiver request is likely to pass muster “if the information disclosed is new; supports public oversight of agency operations, including the quality of agency activities and the effects of agency policy or regulations on public health or safety; or, otherwise confirms or clarifies data on past or present operations of the government.” *McClellan Ecological Seepage Situation v. Carlucci*, 835 F.2d at 1284-1286 (9th Cir. 1987).

This information request meets that description, for reasons both obvious and specified.
1) The subject matter of the requested records specifically concerns identifiable operations or activities of the government. Potentially responsive records reflect OMB involvement with EPA on high-profile, highly controversial regulations as part of what is colloquially known as the administration’s “war on coal”, particularly its December 2009 “endangerment” finding and subsequent efforts to regulate greenhouse gases (GHGs) under the Clean Air Act, the costs and benefits (OIRA’s domain) and how EPA is seemingly attempting to finesse them having become one of the rules’ more contentious aspects.3 We are aware including through other FOIA productions that Mr. Fitzpatrick consulted on this very early on with high-ranking political appointees at EPA.4

Release of these records also directly relates to high-level promises by the President and the Attorney General to be “the most transparent administration in history.”5 This transparency promise, in its serial incarnations, demanded and spawned widespread media coverage, and study which prompted further media and public interest

3 See e.g., U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Institute for Energy Research on this at https://www.uschamber.com/blog/epa-pumps-benefits-proposed-carbon-regulation and http://instituteforenergyresearch.org/analysis/epas-absurd-justifications-power-plant-regulations/, respectively.

4 For a timeline of this rule making see e.g., http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/Downloads/endangerment/EndangermentFinding_Timeline.pdf.

as well as congressional oversight (see e.g., an internet search of “study Obama transparency”).

Particularly after undersigned counsel’s recent discoveries using FOIA (see examples of media coverage cited herein), related publicizing of certain agency record-management and electronic communication practices and related other efforts to disseminate the information, the public, media, and Congressional oversight bodies have expressed great interest in how widespread are the violations of this pledge of unprecedented transparency and, particularly, in the issue central to the present request (record retention or destruction).

This request, when satisfied, will further inform this ongoing public discussion.

For the aforementioned reasons, potentially responsive records unquestionably reflect “identifiable operations or activities of the government” with a connection that is direct and clear, not remote.

The Department of Justice Freedom of Information Act Guide expressly concedes that this threshold is easily met. There can be no question that this is such a case.

2) **Requester intends to broadly disseminate responsive information.** As demonstrated herein including in the litany of exemplars of newsworthy FOIA activity requester has generated with public information and requester has both the intent and the ability to convey any information obtained through this request to the public.
CEI and requesting counsel, particularly for his FOIA work, regularly publish works and are regularly cited in newspapers and trade and political publications, representing a practice of broadly disseminating public information obtained under FOIA, which practice requester intends to continue in the instant matter.⁶

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3) Disclosure is “likely to contribute” to an understanding of specific
government operations or activities because the releasable material will be
meaningfully informative in relation to the subject matter of the request. Requester
intends to broadly disseminate responsive information. The requested records have an
informative value and are “likely to contribute to an understanding of Federal
government operations or activities,” just as did requester’s (and others’) similar FOIA
requests, this issue is of significant and increasing public interest. This is not subject to
reasonable dispute.

However, the Department of Justice’s Freedom of Information Act Guide
makes it clear that, in the DoJ’s view, the “likely to contribute” determination
hinges in substantial part on whether the requested documents provide information
that is not already in the public domain. It cannot be denied that, to the extent the
requested information is available to any parties, this is information held only by OMB or
EPA, is therefore clear that the requested records are “likely to contribute” to an
understanding of your agency's decisions because they are not otherwise accessible other
than through a FOIA request.

Thus, disclosure and dissemination of this information will facilitate meaningful
public participation in the policy debate, therefore fulfilling the requirement that the
documents requested be “meaningfully informative” and “likely to contribute” to an
understanding of your agency's dealings with interested parties outside the agency and
interested -- but not formally involved -- employees who may nonetheless be having an
impact on the federal permitting process, state and local processes and/or activism on the issue.

4) **The disclosure will contribute to the understanding of the public at large, as opposed to the understanding of the requester or a narrow segment of interested persons.** Requester has an established practice of utilizing FOIA to educate the public, lawmakers, and news media about the government’s operations and, in particular and as illustrated in detail above, have brought to light important information about policies grounded in energy and environmental policy. CEI intends to continue this effort in the context of and using records responsive to this request, as debate, analysis and publication continue on these regulations.

CEI is dedicated to and has a documented record of promoting the public interest, advocating sensible policies to protect human health and the environment, broadly disseminating public information, and routinely receiving fee waivers under FOIA.

With a demonstrated interest and record in the relevant policy debates and expertise in the subject of energy- and environment-related regulatory policies, CEI unquestionably has the “specialized knowledge” and “ability and intention” to disseminate the information requested in the broad manner, and to do so in a manner that contributes to the understanding of the “public-at-large.”

5) **The disclosure will contribute “significantly” to public understanding of government operations or activities.** We repeat and incorporate here by reference the
arguments above from the discussion of how disclosure is “likely to contribute” to an understanding of specific government operations or activities.

As previously mentioned, there is no available information for the public at large on these early (e.g., January and February 2009) interactions between Mr. Fitzpatrick and senior political appointees at EPA on these matters — which, other FOIA productions also show, EPA worked to disinterest the media and public in by “downplay[ing]” reports that it was working behind the scenes to regulate GHGs — let alone what influence OMB/OIRA had on decisions made by the EPA and how these square with EPA’s highly contentious claims of costs and benefits of its agenda.

Because there is no such information or any such analysis in existence, any increase in public understanding of this issue is a significant contribution to this increasingly important issue as regards the operation and function of government.

Because CEI has no commercial interests of any kind, disclosure can only result in serving the needs of the public interest.

Other Considerations

OMB must consider four conditions to determine whether a request is in the public interest and uses four factors in making that determination. We have addressed all factors, but add the following additional considerations relevant to factors 2 and 4.
Factor 2

FOIA requires the Requester to show that the disclosure is likely to contribute to an understanding of government operations or activities. Under this factor, agencies assess the “informative value” of the records and demands “an increase” in understanding. This factor 2 has a fatal logical defect. Agencies offer no authority for requiring an “increase” in understanding, nor does it provide a metric by which to measure an increase. And, agencies offer no criteria by which to determine under what conditions information that is in the records and is already somewhere in the public domain would be likely to contribute to public understanding.

Agencies typically argue that they evaluate Factor 2 (and all others) on a case by case basis. In doing so, it “must pour ‘some definitional content’ into a vague statutory term by ‘defining the criteria it is applying.’” *PDK Labs. v. United States DEA*, 438 F.3d 1184, 1194, (D.C. Cir. 2006)(citations omitted). “To refuse to define the criteria it is applying is equivalent to simply saying no without explanation.” *Id.* “A substantive regulation must have sufficient content and definitiveness as to be a meaningful exercise in agency lawmaking. It is certainly not open to an agency to promulgate mush.” *Paralyzed Veterans of Am. V. D.C. Arena LP*, 117 F.3d 579, 584 (D.C. Cir. 1997). Agency failure to pour any definitional content into the term “increase” does not even rise to the level of mush.

Despite the lack of any metric on what would constitute a sufficient increase in public understanding, the Requester meets the requirement because for the information
we seek there is no public information. The information we seek will be used to increase the public’s understanding of a current OMB’s employee’s role in the EPA’s endangerment regulations. There is no public information available on this issue. Any information on that would increase the public’s knowledge.

The public has no other means to secure information on these government operations other than through the Freedom of Information Act. Absent access to the public record, the public cannot learn about these governmental activities and operations.

Factor 4

Agencies requires the Requester to show how the disclosure is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of government operations or activities.

Once again, we note that agencies have not provided any definitional content into the vague statutory term “significantly,” offering no criteria or metric by which to measure the significance of the contribution to public understanding CEI will provide. Nevertheless, as previously explained, the public has no source of information on the issue. Any increase in public understanding of this issue is a significant contribution to this highly visible and politically important issue as regards the operation and function of government, especially at a time when agency transparency is (rightly) so controversial.

As such, requester has stated “with reasonable specificity that their request pertains to operations of the government,” that they intend to broadly disseminate responsive records. “[T]he informative value of a request depends not on there being

We note that federal agencies regularly waive requester CEI’s fees for substantial productions arising from requests expressing the same intention, even using the same language as used in the instant request.7 This request is unlikely to yield substantial document production.

For all of these reasons, CEI’s fees should be waived in the instant matter.

7 See, e.g., no fees required by other agencies for processing often substantial numbers of records on the same or nearly the same but less robust waiver-request language include: *DoI* OS-2012-00113, OS-2012-00124, OS-2012-00172, FWS-2012-00380, BLM-2014-00004, BLM-2012-016, BLM: EFTS 2012-00264, CASO 2012-00278, NVSO 2012-00277; *NOAA* 2013-001089, 2013-000297, 2013-000298, 2010-0199, and “Peterson-Stock letter” FOIA (August 6, 2012 request, no tracking number assigned, records produced); *DoL* (689053, 689056, 691856 (all from 2012)); *FERC* 14-10; *DoE* HQ-2010-01442-F, 2010-00825-F, HQ-2011-01846, HQ-2012-00351-F, HQ-2014-00161-F, HQ-2010-0096-F, GO-09-060, GO-12-185, HQ-2012-00707-F; *NSF* (10-141); *OSTP* 12-21, 12-43, 12-45, 14-02.; *EPA* HQ-2013-000606, HQ-FOI-01087-12, HQ-2013-001343, R6-2013-00361, R6-2013-00362, R6-2013-00363, HQ-FOI-01312-10, R9-2013-007631, HQ-FOI-01268-12, HQ-FOI-01269, HQ-FOI-01270-12, HQ-2014-006434. These latter examples involve EPA either waiving fees, not addressing the fee issue, or denying fee waiver but dropping that posture when requester sued.
Alternately, CEI qualifies as a media organization for purposes of fee waiver

The provisions for determining whether a requesting party is a representative of the news media, and the “significant public interest” provision, are not mutually exclusive. Again, as CEI is a non-commercial requester, it is entitled to liberal construction of the fee waiver standards. 5 U.S.C.S. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii), Perkins v. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Alternately and only in the event OMB/OIRA refuses to waive our fees under the “significant public interest” test, which we would then appeal while requesting OMB proceed with processing on the grounds that we are a media organization, we request a waiver or limitation of processing fees pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(“fees shall be limited to reasonable standard charges for document duplication when records are not sought for commercial use and the request is made by.... a representative of the news media…”).

However, we note that as documents (emails) are requested and available electronically, there are no copying costs.

Requester repeats by reference the discussion as to its publishing practices, reach and intentions to broadly disseminate, all in fulfillment of CEI’s mission, set forth supra.

Also, the federal government has already acknowledged that CEI qualifies as a media organization under FOIA. ⁸

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⁸ See e.g., Treasury FOIA Nos. 2012-08-053, 2012-08-054.
The key to “media” fee waiver is whether a group publishes, as CEI most surely does. See supra. In National Security Archive v. Department of Defense, 880 F.2d 1381 (D.C. Cir. 1989), the D.C. Circuit wrote:

The relevant legislative history is simple to state: because one of the purposes of FIRA is to encourage the dissemination of information in Government files, as Senator Leahy (a sponsor) said: “It is critical that the phrase ‘representative of the news media’ be broadly interpreted if the act is to work as expected.... If fact, any person or organization which regularly publishes or disseminates information to the public ... should qualify for waivers as a ‘representative of the news media.’”

Id. at 1385-86 (emphasis in original).

As the court in Electronic Privacy Information Center v. Department of Defense, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5 (D.D.C. 2003) noted, this test is met not only by outlets in the business of publishing such as newspapers; instead, citing to the National Security Archives court, it noted one key fact is determinative, the “plan to act, in essence, as a publisher, both in print and other media.” EPIC v. DOD, 241 F.Supp.2d at 10 (emphases added). “In short, the court of appeals in National Security Archive held that ‘[a] representative of the news media is, in essence, a person or entity that gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw material into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience.’” Id. at 11. See also, Media Access Project v. FCC, 883 F.2d 1063, 1065 (D.C. Cir. 1989).

For these reasons, CEI plainly qualifies as a “representative of the news media” under the statutory definition, because it routinely gathers information of interest to the public, uses editorial skills to turn it into distinct work, and distributes that work to the public.
The information is of critical importance to the nonprofit policy advocacy groups engaged on these relevant issues, news media covering the issues, and others concerned with OMB/OIRA activities in this controversial area, or as the Supreme Court once noted, what their government is up to.

For these reasons, requester qualifies as a “representative[] of the news media” under the statutory definition, because it routinely gathers information of interest to the public, uses editorial skills to turn it into distinct work, and distributes that work to the public. See EPIC v. Dep’t of Defense, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5 (D.D.C. 2003)(non-profit organization that gathered information and published it in newsletters and otherwise for general distribution qualified as representative of news media for purpose of limiting fees). Courts have reaffirmed that non-profit requesters who are not traditional news media outlets can qualify as representatives of the new media for purposes of the FOIA, particularly after the 2007 amendments to FOIA. See ACLU of Washington v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, No. C09-0642RSL, 2011, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 26047 at *32 (W.D. Wash. Mar. 10, 2011). See also Serv. Women’s Action Network v. DOD, 2012 U.S. Dist. Lexis 45292 (D. Conn., Mar. 30, 2012).

Accordingly, any fees charged must be limited to duplication costs. The records requested are available electronically and are requested in electronic format, so there should be no costs.
Conclusion

We expect OMB to release within the statutory period all responsive records and any segregable portions of responsive records containing properly exempt information, to disclose records possibly subject to exemptions to the maximum extent permitted by FOIA’s discretionary provisions and otherwise proceed with a bias toward disclosure, consistent with the law’s clear intent, judicial precedent affirming this bias, and President Obama’s directive to all federal agencies on January 26, 2009. Memo to the Heads of Exec. Offices and Agencies, Freedom of Information Act, 74 Fed. Reg. 4683 (Jan. 26, 2009) (“The Freedom of Information Act should be administered with a clear presumption: in the face of doubt, openness prevails. The Government should not keep information confidential merely because public officials might be embarrassed by disclosure, or because of speculative or abstract fears”).

We expect all aspects of this request including the search for responsive records be processed free from conflict of interest. We request OMB provide particularized assurance that it is reviewing some quantity of records with an eye toward production on some estimated schedule, so as to establish some reasonable belief that it is processing our request. 5 U.S.C.A. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i). OMB must at least inform us of the scope of potentially responsive records, including the scope of the records it plans to produce and the scope of documents that it plans to withhold under any FOIA exemptions; FOIA specifically requires OMB to immediately notify CEI with a particularized and substantive determination, and of its determination and its reasoning, as well as CEI’s right to appeal; further, FOIA’s unusual circumstances safety valve to
extend time to make a determination, and its exceptional circumstances safety valve
providing additional time for a diligent agency to complete its review of records, indicate
that responsive documents must be collected, examined, and reviewed in order to
constitute a determination. See Citizens for Responsible Ethics in Washington v. Federal
Election Commission, 711 F.3d 180, 186 (D.C. Cir. 2013). See also, Muttitt v. U.S.
Sept. 28, 2011)(addressing “the statutory requirement that [agencies] provide estimated
dates of completion”).

We request a rolling production of records, such that the agency furnishes records
to my attention as soon as they are identified, preferably electronically, but as needed
then to my attention, at the address below. We inform OMB of our intention to protect our
appellate rights on this matter at the earliest date should OMB not comply with FOIA per,
e.g., CREW v. Fed. Election Comm’n, 711 F.3d 180 (D.C. Cir. 2013).

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to
your timely response.

Sincerely,

Christopher C. Horner
Competitive Enterprise Institute
1899 L Street, NW, 12th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036
202.262.4458 (M)
chorner@cei.org