



May 8, 2019

VIA ONLINE PORTAL

Records, FOIA, and Privacy Branch
Office of Environmental Information
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW (2822T)
Washington, DC 20460
Via FOIAOnline

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Freedom of Information Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 40 C.F.R. Part 2, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

In late 2018, EPA announced a proposed change to Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) that would make it easier for power plants to challenge the rule's implementation. In its proposed change, EPA stated it is not "appropriate and necessary to regulate [hazardous air pollutants] from coal- and oil-fired [electric utility steam generating units]" because of the cost it places on power plants.¹ EPA has proposed altering the cost-benefit analysis underlying MATS by not calculating benefits of reducing other pollutants, a move which would favor power plants.² Making the rule harder to implement threatens necessary improvements in public health; EPA itself estimated that MATS prevents 11,000 premature deaths, 4,700 heart attacks and 130,000 asthma attacks every year.³

American Oversight seeks records to shed light on whether and to what extent the administration's air quality standards are being shaped by the industry at the expense of public health.

¹ Environmental Protection Agency, *National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants: Coal- and Oil-Fired Electric Utility Steam Generating Units—Reconsideration of Supplemental Finding and Residual Risk and Technology Review*, 84 Fed. Reg. 2,670 (Feb. 7, 2019), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/02/07/2019-00936/national-emission-standards-for-hazardous-air-pollutants-coal-and-oil-fired-electric-utility-steam>.

² Jennifer Ludden & Jeff Brady, *Trump EPA Says Mercury Limits On Coal Plants Too Costly, Not 'Necessary'*, NPR, Dec. 28, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/28/679129613/trump-epa-says-mercury-limits-on-coal-plants-too-costly-not-necessary>.

³ *Mercury and Air Toxics Standards Healthier Americans*, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, <https://www.epa.gov/mats/healthier-americans>.



Requested Records

American Oversight requests that EPA produce the following within twenty business days:

All email communications (including emails, email attachments, and calendar invitations) between (1) any political appointee* within the Office of Air and Radiation (OAR) and (2) any of the following entities, including emails on which any relevant custodian and/or entity was copied (cc'd) or blind copied (bcc'd):

- a. National Mining Association (@nma.org)
- b. Peabody Energy (@PeabodyEnergy.com)
- c. Murray Energy (@murray-energy.com, @coalsource.com, @murrayenergycorp.com)
- d. Arch Coal (@archcoal.com)
- e. Cloud Peak Energy (@cldpk.com)
- f. Alpha Natural Resources (@conturaenergy.com)
- g. Southern Company (@southernco.com)
- h. American Electric Power (@aep.com.)
- i. Duke Energy Corp (@duke-energy.com)
- j. Ameren Corporation (@ameren.com)
- k. Luminant (@Luminant.com)
- l. FirstEnergy (@firstenergycorp.com)

For this request, American Oversight requests that EPA limit its search to communications containing any of the following terms:

- a. MATS
- b. Mercury and Air Toxics Standards
- c. Michigan v. EPA
- d. appropriate and necessary
- e. Co-benefits
- f. HAP emissions
- g. Section 112(c)

Please provide all responsive records from June 1, 2018 through February 9, 2019.

*“Political appointee” should be understood as any person who is a Presidential Appointee with Senate Confirmation (PAS), a Presidential Appointee (PA), a Non-career SES, any Schedule C employees, or any persons hired under Temporary Non-career SES Appointments, Limited Term SES Appointments, or Temporary Transitional Schedule C Appointments.

In addition to the records requested above, we also request records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If EPA uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁴ **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; we have a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**⁵

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered EPA’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**⁶ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but EPA’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insist that EPA use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. We are available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may**

⁴ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

⁵ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁶ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”⁷ If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, we request that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”⁸ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”⁹ Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”¹⁰

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹¹ Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, EPA is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, we welcome an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, we can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street, NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

⁷ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

⁸ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

⁹ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphases in original).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹¹ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way.¹² Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹³

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest as it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of government operations and activities.¹⁴ Mercury exposure—even in small amounts—can be devastating to public health. According to EPA, the effects of mercury poisoning include impaired motor function, neurological damage, and death.¹⁵ These standards prevent 11,000 premature deaths, 4,700 heart attacks and 130,000 asthma attacks every year.¹⁶ American communities have the right to understand exactly which industries are seeking to influence EPA’s policy on mercury exposure. And, as described in more detail below, American Oversight will disseminate any information released in response to this request to a reasonably broad audience of persons through its social media accounts and its website.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁷ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁸ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,¹⁹ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and

¹² 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(1).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*; see also 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(2)(i)-(iv).

¹⁵ *Health Effects of Exposures to Mercury*, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY <https://www.epa.gov/mercury/health-effects-exposures-mercury>.

¹⁶ *Mercury and Air Toxics Standards Healthier Americans*, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, <https://www.epa.gov/mats/healthier-americans>.

¹⁷ 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(1); 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(3)(i)-(ii).

¹⁸ American Oversight currently has approximately 12,500 followers on Facebook and 54,100 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited May 1, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited May 1, 2019).

¹⁹ *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco’s Recusal*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.²⁰ As another example, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.²¹

Accordingly, this request qualifies for a fee waiver.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. We look forward to working with EPA on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Hart Wood at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.873.1743. Also, if our request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,



Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight

²⁰ *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

²¹ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.