



October 10, 2018

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Alexis R. Graves  
Departmental FOIA Officer  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
South Building, Room 4104  
Washington, DC 20250-0706  
[USDAFOIA@ocio.usda.gov](mailto:USDAFOIA@ocio.usda.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear Ms. Graves:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 7 C.F.R. Part 1, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The rains that accompanied Hurricane Florence created environmental and health risks when lagoons of pig waste overflowed or were otherwise structurally compromised.<sup>1</sup> A recent study found “that people who live near hog farm operations have higher rates of infant mortality, kidney disease, tuberculosis, septicemia, and higher hospital admissions.”<sup>2</sup> American Oversight seeks records that will shed light on whether and to what extent USDA is engaged in the response efforts to the risks posed by the hog lagoons.

**Requested Records**

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

All e-mail communications from September 1, 2018, through September 30, 2018, between all political appointees in the following USDA offices:

- a) The immediate Office of the Secretary;
- b) The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights;

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<sup>1</sup> John Murawski, *Florence Kills 5,500 Pigs and 3.4 Million Chickens. The Numbers Are Expected to Rise.*, THE NEWS & OBSERVER (Sept. 19, 2018, 6:39 PM), <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article218610365.html>; Kendra Pierre-Louis, *Lagoons of Pig Waste Are Overflowing After Florence. Yes, That’s as Nasty as It Sounds.*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/climate/florence-hog-farms.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Murawski, *supra* note 1.



- c) The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations;
- d) The Office of the Under Secretary for Food Safety;
- e) The immediate Office of the Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation;
- f) The Risk Management Agency; and
- g) The Farm Service Agency's Office of the State Executive Director of North Carolina,

And any of the following entities or individuals representing these entities:

- i) The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, including anyone whose email address ends in @ncdenr.gov;
- ii) The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, including anyone whose email address ends in @dhhs.nc.gov;
- iii) The North Carolina Pork Council (NCPC), including Andy Curliss, Jan Archer, and anyone whose email address ends in @ncpork.org;
- iv) The National Pork Producers Council (NPPC), including John Weber, Neil Dierks, Michael Formica, Tom Hebert, Nick Giordano, and anyone whose email address ends in @nppc.org;
- v) Smithfield Foods, Inc., including Michael Skahill and anyone whose email address ends in @smithfield.com or @smithfieldfoods.com;
- vi) Murphy-Brown, LLC, including anyone whose email address ends in @murphybrownllc.com; or
- vii) The National Pork Board, including Bill Even, Steve Rommereim, Deborah Ballance, Terry O'Neel, Brett Kaysen, Scott Phillips, Heather Hill, and anyone whose email address ends in @pork.org.

This request includes all messages on which a political appointee appears (whether in the to, from, cc, or bcc field), as well as all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in the responsive correspondence and any attachments thereto. "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.

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.<sup>3</sup> **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; American Oversight has 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.**<sup>4</sup>

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 USDA’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.**<sup>5</sup> 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 USDA’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that USDA 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. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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)).

<sup>5</sup> 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>.

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.”<sup>6</sup> If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.’”<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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, you are 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, American Oversight welcomes 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, American Oversight hopes to 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 or TIF 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 to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

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<sup>6</sup> FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

<sup>7</sup> *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

<sup>8</sup> *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphases in original).

<sup>9</sup> *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)).

<sup>10</sup> *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

## Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6, 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.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>12</sup>

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is “in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding” of government.”<sup>13</sup> Lagoons of pig waste have historically posed environmental and health risks to the communities in which they are found rendering them a topic of significant public interest.<sup>14</sup> USDA has a regulatory interest in this issue, and the requested records will reveal whether and to what extent the agency has been involved in recovery efforts post-Florence. Moreover, as discussed below, American Oversight has the capacity and intention to inform a broad audience about government activities that are the subject of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>15</sup> 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 will use the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight will also make materials it gathers available on our public website and promote their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>16</sup> One example of American Oversight’s demonstrated public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content is in its recently launched “Audit the Wall” effort, where the organization is

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<sup>11</sup> 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a).

<sup>12</sup> 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a).

<sup>13</sup> 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a)(1)(i)-(iv).

<sup>14</sup> See Murawski, *supra* note 1; Pierre-Louis, *supra* note 1; Dan Charles, *Florence Engulfs Hog Farms and Chicken Houses, Thrashing North Carolina Agriculture*, NPR (Sept. 18, 2018, 1:39 PM), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/09/18/649132289/florence-engulfs-hog-farms-and-chicken-houses-thrashing-north-carolina-agricultu>.

<sup>15</sup> 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a)(1)(v)-(vi).

<sup>16</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 11,900 page likes on Facebook and 45,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Oct. 3, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Oct. 3, 2018).

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.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

**Conclusion**

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with USDA 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 Cerissa Cafasso at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or (202) 869-5244. Also, if American Oversight's 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

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<sup>17</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.