



October 31, 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

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), American Oversight makes the following request for records.

On October 8, 2018, the United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report finding that limiting global warming to an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius would require rapid and far-reaching changes in all aspects of society.¹ American Oversight submits this request to shed light on how the government considered or contributed to these grave findings, as well as any actions taken by an administration that has historically downplayed² the reality³ of climate change to address this crisis.

¹ United Nations, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Report, *Global Warming of 1.5° C*, Oct. 8, 2018, available at <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.

² Adam Alton, *New Climate Censorship Tracker Comes Online*, SCIENTIFIC AM., Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/new-climate-censorship-tracker-comes-online/>; Jeff Tollefson, *Science Under Siege: Behind the Scenes at Trump's Troubled Environment Agency*, NATURE, July 12, 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05706-9>; Julia Belluz & Umair Irfan, *The Disturbing New Language of Science Under Trump, Explained*, VOX (Jan. 30, 2018, 10:17 AM), <https://www.vox.com/2017/12/20/16793010/cdc-word-ban-trump-censorship-language>.

³ See, e.g., *Scientific Consensus: Earth's Climate is Warming*, NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION, <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>; J. Cook et al., *Consensus on Consensus: A Synthesis of Consensus Estimates on Human-Caused Global Warming*, Environmental Research Letters, Vol. 11 No. 4 (Apr. 13, 2016), available at <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/11/4/048002>; *Human-Induced Climate Change Requires Urgent Action*, AMERICAN GEOPHYSICAL UNION (adopted 2003; revised and reaffirmed Aug. 2013), available at <https://sciencepolicy.agu.org/files/2013/07/AGU-Climate->



Requested Records

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

All email communications and associated attachments sent or received by any political appointee* in the offices identified below, including emails on which any custodian is copied (cc'd) or blind copied (bcc'd). Responsive records are limited to those including any of the following terms:

- IPCC
- “Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change”
- “United Nations report”
- UN
- “1.5 C”
- “1.5 degrees”
- “global warming”
- “climate change”

USDA may limit its search to the following offices:

- Office of the Secretary
- Office of the Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics
- Office of the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment

Please provide all responsive records from September 15, 2018, through October 31, 2018.

*“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, American Oversight also requests 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 your agency uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe

[Change-Position-Statement August-2013.pdf](#); *Climate Change*, THE GEOLOGICAL SOC’Y OF AM. (adopted Oct. 2006, revised Apr. 2015), available at <https://www.geosociety.org/gsa/positions/position10.aspx>.

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; 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.**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 your agency’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

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,

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 your agency's archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that your agency 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.**

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, 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.”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.

“Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

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.

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 it undertakes a search or incurs 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 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.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's implementing regulations, 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 public understanding of those operations. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

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 activities of the government. The government has a duty to care for the general welfare of its citizens, and its action on climate change is a critical government activity, especially in the face of the new IPCC report, which clearly outlines the dangers of waiting to address this crisis seriously. There are few—if any—matters of greater public concern than anthropogenic climate change, as reflected both by the scientific consensus¹² and media reporting¹³ as to the necessity of urgent action. The public has

¹² See note 3, *supra*.

¹³ See, e.g., Sophie Aziakou, *Climate Change: Urgent Action Needed to Avert a Crisis for Children*, FORBES (Oct. 10, 2018, 4:07 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/unicefusa/2018/10/10/climate-change-urgent-action-needed-to-avert-a-crisis-for-children>; Matthew Taylor et al., *IPCC Climate Change Report Calls for Urgent Action to Phase Out Fossil Fuels*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct. , 2018, 7:16 AM), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/live/2018/oct/08/ipcc-climate-change-report-urgent-action-fossil-fuels-live>; Stephen Leahy, *Climate Change Impacts Worse Than Expected, Global Report Warns*, NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC, Oct. 7, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/10/ipcc-report-climate-change-impacts-forests-emissions/>.

a profound interest in understanding whether and to what extent the government has taken the IPCC’s findings into consideration. And, as described in more detail below, American Oversight “will disseminate the information to a reasonably broad audience of persons” through its social media accounts and its website.

This request is primarily and fundamentally not for commercial purposes, but rather the primary interest is in public disclosure of responsive records. 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.¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ’s process for ethics waivers.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

¹⁴ American Oversight currently has approximately 11,900 page likes on Facebook and 45,600 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Oct. 31, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Oct. 31, 2018).

¹⁵ *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

¹⁶ *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>.

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

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency 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 American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight