



September 24, 2019

VIA FOIA ONLINE

Departmental FOIA Officer
Office of Privacy and Open Government
U.S. Department of Commerce
14th and Constitution Avenue NW
Mail Stop 52010FB
Washington, DC 20230
Via FOIAOnline

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the U.S. Department of Commerce (Commerce), 15 C.F.R. Part 4, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

On September 1, 2019, with Hurricane Dorian wreaking havoc in the Bahamas and poised to strike the Southeastern United States, President Donald Trump tweeted that, “[i]n addition to Florida - South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, will most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated. Looking like one of the largest hurricanes ever. Already category 5. BE CAREFUL! GOD BLESS EVERYONE!”¹ Soon thereafter, the National Weather Service (NWS) in Birmingham, Alabama, tweeted that, to the contrary, “Alabama will NOT see any impacts from #Dorian. We repeat, no impacts from Hurricane #Dorian will be felt across Alabama. The system will remain too far east. #alwx.”²

A few days later, the president provided an update on the storm, referencing a map that had apparently been doctored with a Sharpie pen to show the storm’s path veering into Alabama—an act that occupied media and public attention for days.³ Then, on Friday, September 6, 2019, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) (a component of Commerce that encompasses NWS), issued a statement seemingly

¹ Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), TWITTER (Sept. 1, 2019, 10:05 AM), <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1168174613827899393?s=20>.

² National Weather Service, Birmingham, AL (@NWSBirmingham), TWITTER (Sept. 1, 2019, 11:11 AM), <https://twitter.com/NWSBirmingham/status/1168179647667814400?s=20>.

³ Emily Stewart, *The Incredibly Absurd Trump/CNN SharpieGate Feud, Explained*, VOX (Sept. 6, 2019, 12:50 PM), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/9/6/20851971/trump-hurricane-dorian-alabama-sharpie-cnn-media>.



chastising NWS Birmingham for its September 1 tweet contradicting the president.⁴ Subsequent reporting revealed that threats from Secretary Wilbur Ross to fire top NOAA employees may have resulted in NOAA's September 6 statement.⁵

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on these events.

Requested Records

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

1. All records reflecting directives, instructions, or guidance **provided by the White House** related to Hurricane Dorian, its potential impact on Alabama, social media posts (including tweets) about those topics, and agency staffing and/or disciplinary actions related to those subjects.
2. All records reflecting directives, instructions, or guidance **provided by Commerce** to NOAA and/or the National Weather Service in Birmingham, Alabama, related to Hurricane Dorian, its potential impact on Alabama, social media posts (including tweets) about those topics, and agency staffing and/or disciplinary actions related to those subjects.

To be clear, talking points, notes, or other records used in preparation for or created during oral communications during which any such directives, instructions, or guidance were issued are responsive to this request.

Please provide all responsive records from September 1, 2019, through September 14, 2019.

American Oversight believes that Commerce is in the best position to identify custodians of records responsive to this request. However, American Oversight requests that Commerce search, at a minimum, the following custodians:

- i. Secretary Wilbur Ross, and anyone communicating on his behalf, such as Executive Assistant Brooke Alexander, or other assistants or schedulers;
- ii. Senior White House Advisor Eric Branstad, or anyone else serving as White House Advisor, including in an acting capacity;
- iii. Deputy Secretary Karen Dunn Kelley;

⁴ Peter Baker & Sarah Mervosh, *A Presidential Storm Leaves Forecasters Rebuked*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/us/politics/trump-alabama-dorian.html?module=inline>.

⁵ Christopher Flavelle et al., *Commerce Chief Threatened Firings at NOAA After Trump's Dorian Tweets, Sources Say*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/09/climate/hurricane-dorian-trump-tweet.html>.

- iv. Acting Chief of Staff Michael J. Walsh Jr.; and
- v. White House Liaison Peter Barrett, or anyone else serving as White House Liaison, including in an acting capacity.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's 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 a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way. 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 operations or activities of the government."⁶ The public has a significant interest in the degree to which political considerations, as opposed to objective science, are playing a role in executive branch operations and activities. Records with the potential to shed light on this question would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including whether and to what extent the White House and high-ranking Commerce officials have intervened in NOAA or NWS operations. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, and the public's understanding of the government's activities would be enhanced through American Oversight's analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.⁷ 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.⁸

⁶ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁷ *See id.*

⁸ American Oversight currently has approximately 12,250 page likes on Facebook and 54,500 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Sept. 19, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Sept. 19, 2019).

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses posted to its website.⁹ Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of what those records demonstrated regarding the Department’s process for issuing such waivers;¹⁰ posting records received as part of American Oversight’s “Audit the Wall” project to gather and analyze information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;¹¹ posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;¹² posting records and analysis relating to the federal government’s efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;¹³ and posting records and analysis regarding the Department of Justice’s decision in response to demands from Congress to direct a U.S. Attorney to undertake a wide-ranging review and make recommendations regarding criminal investigations relating to the President’s political opponents and allegations of misconduct by the Department of Justice itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹⁴

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

⁹ *News*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

¹⁰ *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco’s Recusal*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>; *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>.

¹¹ *See generally Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *see, e.g., Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

¹² *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.’s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>.

¹³ *Investigating the Trump Administration’s Efforts to Sell Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigating-the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-sell-nuclear-technology-to-saudi-arabia>.

¹⁴ *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. For instance, if the request seeks “communications,” please search all locations likely to contain communications, including relevant hard-copy files, correspondence files, appropriate locations on hard drives and shared drives, emails, text messages or other direct messaging systems (such as iMessage, WhatsApp, Signal, or Twitter direct messages), voicemail messages, instant messaging systems such as Lync or ICQ, and shared messages systems such as Slack.
- 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 for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.¹⁵ 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, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.¹⁶
- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,¹⁷ and many agencies

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

¹⁷ 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

have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.

- 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 a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

Conclusion

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. 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 and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format 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 to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

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, please contact Katherine Anthony at foia@americanoversight.org or

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>.

(202) 897-3918. 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 that reads "Austin R. Evers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight