



August 17, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Office of the Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20210  
[foiarequests@dol.gov](mailto:foiarequests@dol.gov)

**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 Department of Labor (DOL), 29 C.F.R. Part 70, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, has been declared a public health emergency at both the national and international levels.<sup>1</sup> Since late 2019, the virus has spread to dozens of countries, sickened millions of people, and resulted in approximately 170,000 deaths in the U.S. alone.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic has also raised unemployment to record levels<sup>3</sup> and introduced additional risks to workers in critical sectors of the economy, such as healthcare, retail, and food production.<sup>4</sup> Despite

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<sup>1</sup> *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak*, N.Y. Times (Aug. 17, 2020, 12:24 PM), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Rakesh Kochhar, *Unemployment Rose Higher in Three Months Of COVID-19 Than It Did in Two Years of The Great Recession*, Pew Research Center, June 11, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kent Babb et al., *Fallen on the Front Lines: Hundreds of Health-Care Workers Lost Their Lives Battling the Coronavirus*, Wash. Post, June 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/health/healthcare-workers-death-coronavirus/>; Amelia Lucas, *CDC Says 9% of Meatpacking Plant Workers Have Been Diagnosed With Covid-19*, CNBC (July 7, 2020, 1:00 PM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/07/cdc-says-9percent-of-meatpacking-plant-workers-have-been-diagnosed-with-covid-19.html>; Nicole Dungca et al., *On the Front Lines of the Pandemic, Grocery Workers Are in the Dark About Risks*, Wash. Post, May 24, 2020,



the urgent need for the federal government to offer security to those deprived of work and additional protections to essential workers, the Department of Labor and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration have ordered greater discretion in enforcing labor standards<sup>5</sup> and have interpreted emergency legislation such that many workers have been denied benefits like paid sick leave or enhanced unemployment insurance.<sup>6</sup>

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the Department of Labor’s response to the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

**Requested Records**

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

All email communications (including emails, complete email chains, email attachments, calendar invitations, and calendar invitation attachments) **sent** by the specified officials of the Department of Labor listed in Column A below **to** the external entities in Column B.

Column A: Officials in the Department of Labor	Column B: External Entities
i. Secretary of Labor, Eugene Scalia	i. Alliance for Automotive Innovation (@autoalliance.org)
ii. Chief of Staff, Rachel Mondl	ii. Amazon.com Services, LLC (@amazon.com)
iii. Deputy Chief of Staff, Catherine Bartley	iii. American Chemistry Council (@americanchemistry.org)
iv. Executive Secretary, Caroline Harman Robinson	iv. American Farm Bureau Federation (@fb.org)
v. Deputy Secretary, Patrick Pizzella	v. Agricultural Retailers Association (@aradc.org)
vi. Associate Deputy Secretary, Nathan Mehrens	

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2020/05/24/grocery-workers-coronavirus-risks/?arc404=true>.

<sup>5</sup> Occupational Safety and Health Admin., *Discretion in Enforcement when Considering an Employer's Good Faith Efforts During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.osha.gov/memos/2020-04-16/discretion-enforcement-when-considering-employers-good-faith-efforts-during>.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Rebecca Rainey, 'Narrow' DOL Guidance on Coronavirus Benefits for Gig Workers Prompts Protest, Politico (Apr. 6, 2020, 7:37 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/06/narrow-guidance-coronavirus-benefits-workers-protest-170296>; Emily Cochrane et al., *Trump Administration Scales Back Paid Leave in Coronavirus Relief Law*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/politics/coronavirus-paid-leave.html>.

vii.	Counselor to the Deputy Secretary, Brett Swearingen	vi.	American Road & Transportation Builders Association (@artba.org)
viii.	Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs, Robert Bozzuto	vii.	Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc. (@abc.org)
ix.	Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Jonathan Wolfson	viii.	Holland & Knight LLP (@hklaw.com)
x.	Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs, J. Joseph Wheeler	ix.	Industrial Minerals Association of North America (@ima-na.org)
		x.	Michelin North America, Inc. (@michelin.com)
		xi.	Mountaire Farms (@mountaire.com)
		xii.	National Asphalt Pavement Association (@asphalt pavement.org)
		xiii.	National Automobile Dealers Association (@nada.org)
		xiv.	National Association of Home Builders (@nahb.org)
		xv.	National Chicken Council (@chickenusa.org)
		xvi.	National Cotton Council (@cotton.org)
		xvii.	National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (@ncfc.org)
		xviii.	National Federation of Independent Businesses (@nfib.org)
		xix.	Smithfield Foods, Inc. (@smithfield.com or @smithfieldfoods.com)

Please provide all responsive records from March 1, 2020, through the date of the search.

American Oversight has limited its request to sent messages to reduce the volume of potentially responsive records. American Oversight still requests complete email chains. So, for example, if a government official sent a response to an incoming message from a listed entity, the email chain containing the initially received message and the response is responsive to this request.

**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.”<sup>7</sup> The public has a significant interest in the federal government’s response to the coronavirus, including actions taken by agencies to protect workers.<sup>8</sup> Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including the actions of agency officials in addressing the acute economic crisis caused by the coronavirus. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, particularly regarding the actions taken by the Department of Labor to protect Americans from the economic damage and health effects of the pandemic. 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.<sup>9</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 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.<sup>10</sup>

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through regular substantive analyses posted to its website.<sup>11</sup> Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to the Trump Administration’s contacts with Ukraine and analyses of those contacts;<sup>12</sup> posting records and editorial content about the federal government’s response to the

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<sup>7</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., *supra* note 4.

<sup>9</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>10</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,500 page likes on Facebook and 104,300 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited July 20, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 20, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> See *generally* News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>12</sup> *Trump Administration’s Contacts with Ukraine*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-contacts-with-ukraine>.

Coronavirus pandemic;<sup>13</sup> 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;<sup>14</sup> 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;<sup>15</sup> and posting records and analysis of federal officials’ use of taxpayer dollars to charter private aircraft or use government planes for unofficial business.<sup>16</sup>

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:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records.
- 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

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<sup>13</sup> See generally *The Trump Administration’s Response to Coronavirus*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-response-to-coronavirus>; see, e.g., *CDC Calendars from 2018 and 2019: Pandemic-Related Briefings and Meetings*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/cdc-calendars-from-2018-and-2019-pandemic-related-briefings-and-meetings>.

<sup>14</sup> 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>.

<sup>15</sup> *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>.

<sup>16</sup> See generally *Swamp Airlines: Chartered Jets at Taxpayer Expense*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/swamp-airlines-private-jets-taxpayer-expense>; see, e.g., *New Information on Pompeo’s 2017 Trips to His Home State*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/new-information-on-pompeos-2017-trips-to-his-home-state>.

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.<sup>17</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, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>18</sup>
- 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,<sup>19</sup> and many agencies 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

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<sup>17</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>18</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).

<sup>19</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>.

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 Emma Lewis at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or (202) 919-6303. 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