

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 2, 1996

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

I am pleased to sign into law today H.R. 3802, the "Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996."

This bill represents the culmination of several years of leadership by Senator Patrick Leahy to bring this important law up to date. Enacted in 1966, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was the first law to establish an effective legal right of access to government information, underscoring the crucial need in a democracy for open access to government information by citizens. In the last 30 years, citizens, scholars, and reporters have used FOIA to obtain vital and valuable government information.

Since 1966, the world has changed a great deal. Records are no longer principally maintained in paper format. Now, they are maintained in a variety of technologies, including CD ROM and computer tapes and diskettes, making it easier to put more information on-line.

My Administration has launched numerous initiatives to bring more government information to the public. We have established World Wide Web pages, which identify and link information resources throughout the Federal Government. An enormous range of documents and data, including the Federal budget, is now available on-line or in electronic format, making government more accessible than ever. And in the last year, we have declassified unprecedented amounts of national security material, including information on nuclear testing.

The legislation I sign today brings FOIA into the information and electronic age by clarifying that it applies to records maintained in electronic format. This law also broadens public access to government information by placing more material on-line and expanding the role of the agency reading room. As the Government actively disseminates more information, I hope that there will be less need to use FOIA to obtain government information.

This legislation not only affirms the importance, but also the challenge of maintaining openness in government. In a period of government downsizing, the numbers of requests continue to rise. In addition, growing numbers of requests are for information that must be reviewed for declassification, or in which there is a proprietary interest or a privacy concern. The result in many agencies is huge backlogs of requests.

In this Act, the Congress recognized that with today's limited resources, it is frequently difficult to respond to a FOIA request within the 10 days formerly required in the law. This legislation extends the legal response period to 20 days.

More importantly, it recognizes that many FOIA requests are so broad and complex that they cannot possibly be completed even within this longer period, and the time spent processing them only delays other requests. Accordingly, H.R. 3802 establishes procedures for an agency to discuss

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with requesters ways of tailoring large requests to improve responsiveness. This approach explicitly recognizes that FOIA works best when agencies and requesters work together.

Our country was founded on democratic principles of openness and accountability, and for 30 years, FOIA has supported these principles. Today, the "Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996" reforges an important link between the United States Government and the American people.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

THE WHITE HOUSE,
October 2, 1996.

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