



# PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

May 20, 2021

Freedom of Information Act Request

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

**Re: Records Relating to Use of Encrypted Communications by Federal Employees to Conduct Government Business**

Dear FOIA Officer,

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, *as amended* (FOIA), from the Protect the Public's Trust (PPT), a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting ethics in government and restoring the public's trust in government officials.

**Records Requested**

On May 17, 2021, questions were raised during a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Hearing regarding reports that federal employees are using encrypted messaging applications to conduct government business on either personal or government-issued devices. During the hearing, senators questioned whether such encrypted messages are archived and thus maintained as federal records as required by law. Questions were also raised about public availability to obtain encrypted communications relating to official government business. To help inform the public about this issue, PPT requests the following records from the Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Office of the Secretary and the Office of the General Counsel:

All records or communications from, to, or between any employees of the Office of the Secretary and/or the Office of General Counsel relating to, referencing, or mentioning the application Signal or any other encrypted messaging application, their use by USDA employees, and



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how such messages are being properly archived for federal records purposes as required by law. These should include, but not be limited to, any emails discussing legal or policy recommendations regarding FOIA and records retention for encrypted messages.

For this request, the term “all records” refers to, but is not limited to, any and all documents, correspondence, emails, text messages, letters, notes, telephone records, telephone notes, minutes, memoranda, comments, files, presentations, consultations, biological opinions, assessments, evaluations, schedules, telephone logs, digital logs such as those produced by Microsoft Teams, papers published, and/or unpublished, reports, studies, photographs and other images, data (including raw data, GPS or GIS data, UTM, LiDAR, etc.), maps, and/or all other responsive records, in draft or final form.

This request is not meant to exclude any other request that, although not specifically requested, are reasonably related to the subject matter of this request. If you or your office have destroyed or determine to withhold any records that could be reasonably construed to be responsive to this request, I ask that you indicate this fact and the reasons therefore in your response.

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies are prohibited from denying requests for information under the FOIA unless the agency reasonably believes release of the information will harm an interest that is protected by the exemption. FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 (Public Law No. 114-185), codified at 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(8)(A).

Should you decide to invoke a FOIA exemption, please include sufficient information for us to assess the basis for the exemption, including any interest(s) that would be harmed by release. Please include a detailed ledger which includes:

1. Basic factual material about each withheld record, including the originator, date, length, general subject matter, and location of each item; and
2. Complete explanations and justifications for the withholding, including the specific exemption(s) under which the record (or portion thereof) was withheld and a full explanation of how each exemption applies to the withheld material. Such statements will be helpful in deciding whether to appeal an adverse determination. Your written justification may help to avoid litigation.

If you determine that portions of the records requested are exempt from disclosure, we request that you segregate the exempt portions and mail the non-exempt portions of such



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records to my attention at the address below within the statutory time limit. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b).

PPT is willing to receive records on a rolling basis.

These communications could be very relevant to knowing whether or not appointees are being pressured to give “land acknowledgments” or give pronouns. In order to most efficiently facilitate our request, we request that the FOIA office use the email Enterprise Records and Document Management System (eERDMS) to search and process this request.

Finally, FOIA’s “frequently requested record” provision was enacted as part of the 1996 Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments, and requires all federal agencies to give “reading room” treatment to any FOIA-processed records that, “because of the nature of their subject matter, the agency determines have become the subject of subsequent requests for substantially the same records.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(2)(D)(ii)(I). Also, enacted as part of the 2016 FOIA Improvement Act, FOIA’s Rule of 3 requires all federal agencies to proactively “make available for public inspection in an electronic format” “copies of records, regardless of form or format ... that have been released to any person ... and ... that have been requested 3 or more times.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(2)(D)(ii)(I). Therefore, we respectfully request that you make available online any records that the agency determines will become the subject of subsequent requests for substantially the same records, and records that have been requested three or more times.

## **Format of Requested Records**

Under FOIA, you are obligated to provide records in a readily accessible electronic format and in the format requested. See, e.g., 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B) (“In making any record available to a person under this paragraph, an agency shall provide the record in any form or format requested by the person if the record is readily reproducible by the agency in that form or format.”). “Readily accessible” means text-searchable and OCR-formatted. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B). We ask that you please provide all records in an electronic format. Additionally, please provide the records either in (1) load-ready format with a CSV file index or Excel spreadsheet, or; (2) for files that are in .PDF format, without any “portfolios” or “embedded files.” Portfolios and embedded files within files are not readily accessible. Please do not provide the records in a single, or “batched,” .PDF file. We appreciate the inclusion of an index.

If you should seek to withhold or redact any responsive records, we request that you: (1) identify each such record with specificity (including date, author, recipient, and parties copied); (2) explain in full the basis for withholding responsive material; and (3) provide



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all segregable portions of the records for which you claim a specific exemption. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b). Please correlate any redactions with specific exemptions under FOIA.

## Fee Waiver Request

FOIA was designed to provide citizens a broad right to access government records. FOIA's basic purpose is to "open agency action to the light of public scrutiny," with a focus on the public's "right to be informed about what their government is up to." *U.S. Dep't of Justice v. Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 773-74 (1989) (internal quotation and citations omitted). In order to provide public access to this information, FOIA's fee waiver provision requires that "[d]ocuments shall be furnished without any charge or at a [reduced] charge," if the request satisfies the standard. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii). FOIA's fee waiver requirement is "liberally construed." *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Rossotti*, 326 F.3d 1309, 1310 (D.C. Cir. 2003); *Forest Guardians v. U.S. Dept. of Interior*, 416 F.3d 1173, 1178 (10th Cir. 2005).

The 1986 fee waiver amendments were designed specifically to provide non-profit organizations such as PPT access to government records without the payment of fees. Indeed, FOIA's fee waiver provision was intended "to prevent government agencies from using high fees to discourage certain types of requesters and requests," which are "consistently associated with requests from journalists, scholars, and non-profit public interest groups." *Ettlinger v. FBI*, 596 F.Supp. 867, 872 (D. Mass. 1984) (emphasis added). As one Senator stated, "[a]gencies should not be allowed to use fees as an offensive weapon against requesters seeking access to Government information ...." 132 Cong. Rec. S. 14298 (statement of Senator Leahy).

### I. PPT Qualifies for a Fee Waiver.

Under FOIA, a party is entitled to a fee waiver when "disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the [Federal] government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester." 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii). **The Interior FOIA regulations at 43 C.F.R. § 2.48(a)(1)-(4) establish the same standard.**

Thus, USDA must consider four factors to determine whether a request is in the public interest: (1) whether the subject of the requested records concerns "the operations or activities of the Federal government," (2) whether the disclosure is "likely to contribute" to an understanding of government operations or activities, (3) whether the disclosure "will contribute to public understanding" of a reasonably broad audience of persons interested in the subject, and (4) whether the disclosure is likely to contribute "significantly" to public understanding of government operations or activities. 43 C.F.R. § 2.48(a)(1)-(4). As shown below, PPT meets each of these factors.

#### A. The Subject of This Request Concerns "The Operations and Activities of the Government."



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The subject matter of this request concerns the operations and activities of USDA. This request asks for: All records or communications from, to, or between any employees of the Office of the Secretary and/or the Office of General Counsel relating to, referencing, or mentioning the application Signal or any other encrypted messaging application, their use by USDA employees, and how such messages are being properly archived for federal records purposes as required by law. These should include, but not be limited to, any emails discussing legal or policy recommendations regarding FOIA and records retention for encrypted messages.

## B. Disclosure is “Likely to Contribute” to an Understanding of Government Operations or Activities.

The requested records are meaningfully informative about government operations or activities and will contribute to an increased understanding of those operations and activities by the public.

Disclosure of the requested records will allow PPT to convey to the public information about whether USDA officials are using messaging applications that may be encrypted or otherwise protected from archiving or federal record keeping to conduct official government business. After disclosing the requesting records, PPT will inform the public about their findings in order to ensure decisions are being made consistent with the law. Once the information is made available, PPT will analyze it and present it to its followers and the general public in a manner that will meaningfully enhance the public’s understanding of this topic.

Thus, the requested records are likely to contribute to an understanding of USDA operations and activities.

## C. Disclosure of the Requested Records Will Contribute to a Reasonably Broad Audience of Interested Persons’ Understanding of the Department’s Public Relations Strategy Regarding “Land Acknowledgement” Statements and Pronouns

The requested records will contribute to public understanding of how USDA maintains proper federal record keeping standards with all messaging applications being used by its employees to conduct official business.

Through PPT’s synthesis and dissemination (by means discussed in Section II, below), disclosure of information contained and gleaned from the requested records will contribute to a broad audience of persons who are interested in the subject matter.

*Ettlinger v. FBI*, 596 F.Supp. at 876 (benefit to a population group of some size distinct from the requester alone is sufficient); *Carney v. Dep’t of Justice*, 19 F.3d 807, 815 (2d Cir. 1994), cert. denied, 513 U.S. 823 (1994) (applying “public” to require a sufficient “breadth of benefit” beyond the requester’s own interests); *Cnty. Legal Servs. v. Dep’t of Hous. & Urban Dev.*, 405 F.Supp.2d 553, 557 (E.D. Pa. 2005) (in granting fee waiver to



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community legal group, court noted that while the requester's "work by its nature is unlikely to reach a very general audience," "there is a segment of the public that is interested in its work").

Indeed, the public does not currently have an ability to easily evaluate the requested records, which concern possible use of encrypted messaging applications by government employees for official business without proper records retention or availability under FOIA. We also are unaware of these records having been released to date. See *Cnty. Legal Servs. v. HUD*, 405 F.Supp.2d 553, 560 (D. Pa. 2005) (because requested records "clarify important facts" about agency policy, "the CLS request would likely shed light on information that is new to the interested public."). As the Ninth Circuit observed in *McClellan Ecological Seepage Situation v. Carlucci*, 835 F.2d 1282, 1286 (9th Cir. 1987), "[FOIA] legislative history suggests that information [has more potential to contribute to public understanding] to the degree that the information is new and supports public oversight of agency operations...."

Disclosure of these records is not only "likely to contribute," but is certain to contribute, to public understanding of USDA's compliance with FOIA and Federal Records Act requirements for retention and availability of official government records. The public is always well served when it knows that government is maintaining and making publicly available all records that were part of the decision-making process by federal agencies. Hence, there can be no dispute that disclosure of the requested records to the public will educate the public about USDA's federal records retention and FOIA compliance for encrypted messaging applications used by employees for government business.

## D. Disclosure is Likely to Contribute Significantly to Public Understanding of Government Operations or Activities.

PPT is not requesting these records merely for their intrinsic informational value. Disclosure of the requested records will significantly enhance the public's understanding of the Department's FOIA compliance and federal records retention for encrypted messaging applications. Indeed, public understanding will be significantly increased as a result of disclosure.

The records are also certain to shed light on USDA's compliance with its own mission and responsibility to provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on public policy, the best available

science, and effective management. Such public oversight of agency action is vital to our democratic system and clearly envisioned by the drafters of the FOIA. Thus, PPT meets this factor as well.

## II. PPT has the Ability to Disseminate the Requested Information Broadly.



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PPT is a non-profit organization that informs, educates, and counsels the public about the importance of government officials acting consistently with their ethics obligations. A key component of being able to fulfill this mission and educate the public about these duties is access to information that articulates what obligations exist for senior government officials. PPT intends to publish information from requested records on its website, distribute the records and expert analysis to its followers through social media channels including Twitter, Facebook, and other similar platforms. PPT also has a robust network of reporters, bloggers, and media publications interested in its content and that have durable relationships with the organization. PPT intends to use any or all of these far-reaching media outlets to share with the public information obtained as a result of this request.

Through these means, PPT will ensure: (1) that the information requested contributes significantly to the public's understanding of the government's operations or activities; (2) that the information enhances the public's understanding to a greater degree than currently exists; (3) that PPT possesses the expertise to explain the requested information to the public; (4) that PPT possesses the ability to disseminate the requested information to the general public; (5) and that the news media recognizes PPT as a reliable source in the field of government ethics and conduct.

Public oversight and enhanced understanding of USDA's duties is absolutely necessary. In determining whether disclosure of requested information will contribute significantly to public understanding, a guiding test is whether the requester will disseminate the information to a reasonably broad audience of persons interested in the subject. *Carney v U.S. Dept. of Justice*, 19 F.3d 807 (2nd Cir. 1994). PPT need not show how it intends to distribute the information, because "[n]othing in FOIA, the [agency] regulation, or our case law require[s] such pointless specificity." *Judicial Watch*, 326 F.3d at 1314. It is sufficient for PPT to show how it distributes information to the public generally. *Id.*

### III. Obtaining the Requested Records is of No Commercial Interest to PPT.

Access to government records, disclosure forms, and similar materials through FOIA requests is essential to PPT's role of educating the general public. PPT is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with supporters and members of the public who seek a transparent, ethical and impartial government. PPT has no commercial interest and will realize no commercial benefit from the release of the requested records.

### IV. Conclusion

For all of the foregoing reasons, PPT qualifies for a full fee waiver. We hope that the Department will immediately grant this fee waiver request and begin to search and disclose the requested records without any unnecessary delays.



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If you have any questions, please contact me at [foia@protectpublictrust.org](mailto:foia@protectpublictrust.org). All records and any related correspondence should be sent to my attention at the address below.

Sincerely,

Name

Morgan Yardis

Research and Publication Associate

[foia@protectpublictrust.org](mailto:foia@protectpublictrust.org)