

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) at NASA

Making NASA Information Public for More Than 40 Years

www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/FOIA/agency/

Transparency Participation Collaboration

The Freedom of Information Act, enacted in 1966, provides the public access to the way the government conducts their business. This law established for the first time an effective statutory right of access to government information. NASA's FOIA program has, and continues to be, in the forefront of making documents available to the public through answering individual requests received and making frequently requested documents available on the Web. Each of NASA's 10 Centers maintains a FOIA Web site with contact information, information on how to make a request, and a reading room with frequently requested documents published for the public's use.

Overview

The NASA FOIA program is placed in the Public Affairs Offices across the Agency. NASA maintains a decentralized FOIA process, in which we operate and staff FOIA Requester Service Centers at each of our 13 NASA centers or components. This approach enables NASA to reduce our FOIA request processing time and provides a faster response to our requesters. NASA received 1,226 FOIA requests in 2009 with 601 being processed in 20 days or fewer. Only 22 of the 1,226 processed requests were appealed. A complete description of our staffing, organizational structure, and process for analyzing and responding to FOIA requests can be found in our Annual Reports and our Main Web page (see Useful Links).

The type of requests varies from different NASA locations. Center requests deal more with contracts while NASA headquarters requests are more for Agency policy and decisions-making documents. When a request for the same document has been received the third time, it is considered a "frequently requested document" and is placed in the FOIA reading room at the Center it was requested. Each center is required to maintain a reading room to make it easier for requesters to access documents of greater interest.

In 2009, we conducted an assessment of our processes for handling and expediting

Columbia Accident

www.nasa.gov/columbia/foia/



STS-107 taking off on January 16, 2003

Immediately after the Columbia accident, the FOIA office, and many other offices through NASA, developed a plan to use FOIA as a way of informing the public of the accident. The Central FOIA reading room would collect all released documents in regarding the accident. This was an unprecedented move in FOIA processing across government to use FOIA as a primary means of communication in a time of crisis and without a request. While there was uncertainty, the result of swift movement and pro-active processing yielded greater internal, governmental and public support.

FOIA requests and decided to transition to a single, Web-based system for handling all FOIA requests across the 13 NASA locations. This will allow requesters to see where their request is in the process, allowing our staff to focus on responding to active requests. This shift will allow greater insight into the FOIA process, greater accessibility of existing public information, and streamline efforts internally to allow our staff to focus on responding the requests.

Challenges still exist. We currently have a backlog of 276 requests at three of our Centers. From our 2009 Annual Report, the oldest FOIA request in the backlog is close to four years old. We are continually making strides in reducing this backlog at each of these centers with other FOIA personnel helping to reduce the backlog and ensure appropriate expertise on staff. We are on schedule to have the backlog significantly reduced by 10 percent in compliance with the DOJ guidelines by the end of the year.

How This Fits into Open Government

The FOIA has and continues to provide documents to the public through answering of specific requests and maintain reading rooms with documents previously released published. NASA has always had the policy that FOIA requests were to be looked at what can we release instead of what can we withheld. We have maintained a policy of openness from the inception of NASA and the FOIA.

Open Government Goals

- Three months
 - Ensure Web site reading rooms are up to date by posting documents for which three or more requests have been made.
- Six months
 - Provide Web-based access to check the status of submitted requests through our FOIAExpress database.
- One year
 - Consolidate the 13 Agency electronic reading rooms into a one-stop location and refine the public indexing of documents.
 - Decrease by 10 percent the number of FOIA backlogs.
 - Decrease by 11 months the oldest backlog on file.
- Two years
 - Eliminate legacy FOIA database and become solely reliant on our newly procured Web-based database.
 - Create better user experience of reading rooms with integrated public accessibility of the Web-based FOIAExpress system.
 - Decrease by 10 percent the number of FOIA backlogs.
 - Decrease by 11 months the oldest backlog on file.

Useful Links

1. Annual Reports 1999-2009: www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/FOIA/report.
2. NASA Procedural Requirements:
nodis3.gsfc.nasa.gov/displayDir.cfm?t=NPRandc=1441ands=1D
3. NASA FOIA Requester Service Center Addresses:
www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/FOIA/requester-centers.pdf
4. NASA FOIA Public Liaison Officers:
www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/FOIA/Pub_Lia_Officers.pdf
5. Availability of Agency Records to Members of the Public:
www.hq.nasa.gov/pao/FOIA/fedregix.html