

# **Council on Environmental Quality**



## **2022 Chief FOIA Officer Report to the Attorney General**

## Section I: Steps Taken to Apply the Presumption of Openness

The guiding principle underlying DOJ's FOIA Guidelines is the presumption of openness.

Please answer the following questions in order to describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied to all decisions involving the FOIA. You may also include any additional information that illustrates how your agency is working to apply the presumption of openness.

### A. FOIA Leadership

1. The FOIA requires each agency to designate a Chief FOIA Officer who is a senior official at the Assistant Secretary or equivalent level. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(j)(1) (2018). Is your agency's Chief FOIA Officer at this level?

Answer: Yes.

2. Please provide the name and title of your agency's Chief FOIA Officer.

Answer: Amy B. Coyle, Deputy General Counsel

### B. FOIA Training

3. The FOIA directs agency Chief FOIA Officers to ensure that FOIA training is offered to agency personnel. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(j)(2)(F). Please describe the efforts your agency has undertaken to ensure proper FOIA training is made available and used by agency personnel.

Answer: The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Chief FOIA Officer actively encourages FOIA Personnel to attend training offered by the Department of Justice Office of Information Policy. Additionally, the CEQ FOIA Public Liaison provided advanced FOIA training to all CEQ FOIA personnel during the reporting period.

4. Did your FOIA professionals or the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend substantive FOIA training during the reporting period such as that provided by the Department of Justice?

Answer: Yes.

5. If yes, please provide a brief description of the type of training attended or conducted and the topics covered.

Answer: CEQ FOIA professionals attended training offered by the Department of Justice Office of Information Policy, as well as internal FOIA and document review software training. The internal FOIA training focused on disclosure exemptions, White House-specific FOIA issues, and CEQ-specific workflow.

6. Please provide an estimate of the percentage of your FOIA professionals and staff with FOIA responsibilities who attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

Answer: CEQ estimates that 80 percent CEQ FOIA professionals and staff with FOIA responsibilities attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

7. OIP has directed agencies to “take steps to ensure that all of their FOIA professionals attend substantive FOIA training at least once throughout the year.” If your response to the previous question is that less than 80% of your FOIA professionals attended training, please explain your agency’s plan to ensure that all FOIA professionals receive or attend substantive FOIA training during the next reporting year.

Answer: N/A.

8. Did the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend training in federal records management during this reporting period?

Answer: Yes.

#### C. Outreach

9. Did your FOIA professionals engage in any outreach or dialogue, outside of the standard request process, with the requester community or open government groups regarding your administration of the FOIA? Please describe any such outreach or dialogue, and, if applicable, any specific examples of how this dialogue has led to improvements in your agency’s FOIA administration.

Answer: CEQ FOIA professionals routinely communicate with requesters regarding CEQ’s administration of FOIA and continually work to improve customer service when processing and responding to requests. CEQ follows Open Government standards and has a Director of Public Engagement and a Press Secretary who engages with the public.

#### D. Other Initiatives

10. Describe any efforts your agency has undertaken to inform non-FOIA professionals of their obligations under the FOIA. In particular, please describe:

- how often and in what formats your agency provides FOIA training or briefings to non-FOIA staff; and
- if senior leaders at your agency received a briefing on your agency’s FOIA resources, obligations and expectations during the FOIA process?

All new CEQ entrants, including staff, detailee, interns, and clerks, attend records training within 30 days of their start date. This training instructs new entrants on their obligations under the Federal Records Act (FRA) and on the role of FOIA. CEQ FOIA professionals regularly inform CEQ non-FOIA professionals of their FOIA obligations, the presumption of openness, and provide updates and information on the FOIA process as necessary. Given CEQ’s relatively

small size, CEQ provides targeted in-person training and legal counseling to all CEQ staff, detailees, interns, and clerks who help process incoming FOIA requests and consultations.

11. Optional -- If there are any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied, please describe them here.

CEQ directs FOIA requesters to the information they are seeking when such information is publicly available. In addition, CEQ periodically makes proactive disclosures.

## Section II: Steps Taken to Ensure that Your Agency Has an Effective System in Place for Responding to Requests

DOJ's FOIA Guidelines emphasize that "[a]pplication of the proper disclosure standard is only one part of ensuring transparency. Open government requires not just a presumption of disclosure, but also an effective system for responding to FOIA requests." It is essential that agencies effectively manage their FOIA program.

Please answer the following questions to describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the management of your FOIA program is effective and efficient. You should also include any additional information that describes your agency's efforts in this area.

1. For Fiscal Year 2021, what was the average number of days your agency reported for adjudicating requests for expedited processing? Please see Section VIII.A of your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report.

Answer: 5.71

2. If your agency's average number of days to adjudicate requests for expedited processing was above ten calendar days, according to Section VIII.A. of your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report, please describe the steps your agency will take to ensure that requests for expedited processing are adjudicated within ten calendar days or less.

Answer: N/A.

3. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 required all agencies to update their FOIA regulations within 180 days. In 2016, OIP issued Guidance for Agency FOIA Regulations and the accompanying Template for Agency FOIA Regulations to assist agencies in updating their regulations in accordance with the statute. Has your agency updated its FOIA regulations in accordance with the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016? If not, what is your agency's plan to update your regulations?

Answer: No, CEQ's revised FOIA regulations are still in development. However, in practice, CEQ is already complying with all the requirements of the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016.

4. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) generally document your agency's internal processes for administering the FOIA beyond your FOIA regulations and FOIA Reference Guide. As noted in OIP's guidance, having SOPs can improve the consistency and quality of an agency's FOIA process. SOPs can also serve as a significant resource for incoming FOIA professionals and a way to preserve much of the agency's institutional knowledge on administering the FOIA from how to handle requests from start-to-finish, to identifying and making proactive disclosures, to maintaining a FOIA website. Does your agency have up-to-date internal SOPs for your FOIA administration?

Answer: Yes. CEQ has an internal SOP for its general FOIA process and continues to refine it.

5. If not, please provide a timeline for when your agency plans to develop or update its SOPs.

Answer: N/A.

6. Has your agency established alternative means of access to first-party requested records outside of the FOIA process?

Answer: No. However, CEQ occasionally addresses or assists with requests for information for first-party records outside the FOIA process.

7. If yes, please provide examples. If no, please explain if such opportunities exist at your agency and whether there are any challenges in establishing alternative means of access.

Answer: N/A.

8. Did your agency conduct a self-assessment of its FOIA administration during the reporting period? If so, please describe the self-assessment methods used, such as analyzing Annual Report or raw data, using active workflows and track management, reviewing and updating processing procedures, etc. In addition, please specifically highlight any data analysis methods or technologies used to assess your agency's FOIA program.

Answer: Yes. CEQ continuously assesses and refines its in-house FOIA case management tracker. During the reporting period, CEQ augmented its ability to track assigned cases and expanded the amount of case related information being tracked, in an effort to increase workflow efficiency and facilitate report generation.

9. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires additional notification to requesters about the services provided by the agency's FOIA Public Liaison. Please provide an estimate of the number of times requesters sought assistance from your agency's FOIA Public Liaison during FY 2021 (please provide a total number or an estimate of the number).

Answer: There were approximately 10 times during FY 2020 when requesters sought assistance from the CEQ FOIA Public Liaison.

10. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related staffing capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

Answer: Yes.

11. Optional -- Please describe:

- Best practices used to ensure that your FOIA system operates efficiently and effectively
- Any challenges your agency faces in this area.

CEQ FOIA professionals regularly work with the Office of Administration, a component of the Executive Office of the President (EOP) that provides technological infrastructure and services to CEQ including for e-discovery review. CEQ uses NUIX Discover, which makes processing requests more efficient by streamlining the search process and reducing the amount of time it takes to perform initial searches of documents. CEQ regularly reviews its FOIA process to identify further efficiencies and is able to incorporate these improvements into best practices quickly. As with previous years, CEQ's biggest challenge in FY 2021 was processing voluminous FOIA requests with its limited resources.

### Section III: Steps Taken to Increase Proactive Disclosures

The Department of Justice has long focused on the need for agencies to work proactively to post information online without waiting for individual requests to be received.

Please answer the following questions to describe the steps your agency has taken to increase the amount of material that is available on your agency websites. In addition to the questions below, you should also describe any additional steps taken by your agency to make and improve proactive disclosures of information.

1. Please describe what steps your agency takes to identify, track, and post (a)(2) proactive disclosures.

Answer: CEQ staff regularly meet to consider proactively disclosing FOIA productions and other agency documents that the agency expects will be of public interest.

2. Provide examples of any material that your agency has proactively disclosed during the past reporting year, including records that have been requested and released three or more times in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(2)(D). Please include links to these materials as well.

Example 1: CEQ posts and periodically updates a list of agency staff names and titles on its FOIA webpage at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/foia/> (at end of page under "Frequently Requested").

3. Does your agency disseminate common types of material outside of FOIA, including in online databases where the public may access them? If yes, please provide examples and, if applicable, statutory authority.

Answer: CEQ regularly disseminates information via public websites, including NEPA.gov and sustainability.gov, and social media platforms.

4. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the posted information more useful to the public, especially to the community of individuals who regularly access your agency's website?

Answer: In addition to posting new material, CEQ regularly reviews and makes changes to the organization of the materials on its websites, in an effort to make the information more useful and accessible to the public.

5. If yes, please provide examples of such improvements. In particular, please describe steps your agency is taking to post information in open, machine-readable, and machine-actionable formats, to the extent feasible. If not posting in open formats, please explain why and note any challenges.

Answer: During the reporting period, CEQ migrated to the new Presidential Administration's website.

6. Does your proactive disclosure process or system involve any collaboration with agency staff outside the FOIA office? If so, describe this interaction.

Answer: Because of CEQ's small size, several of CEQ's FOIA professionals also are agency attorneys responsible for providing counsel on CEQ programs as well as records management. As such, they are well-positioned to identify documents for proactive disclosure. Additionally, because CEQ's primary public website is hosted by the EOP, CEQ coordinates with EOP when making proactive disclosures, particularly when the disclosures have technical requirements.

Optional -- Please describe:

- Best practices used to improve proactive disclosures
- Any challenges your agency faces in this area

Answer: Due to CEQ's small agency size, CEQ does not have enterprise software to track and manage previously disclosed records.

#### Section IV: Steps Taken to Greater Utilize Technology

A key component of FOIA administration is using technology to make information more accessible. In addition to using the internet to make proactive disclosures, agencies should also be exploring ways to utilize technology in responding to requests.

Please answer the following questions to describe how your agency is utilizing technology to improve its FOIA administration and the public's access to information. You should also include any additional information that describes your agency's efforts in this area.

1. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related technological capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

Answer: Yes.

2. Please briefly describe any new types of technology your agency began using during the reporting period to support your FOIA program.

Answer: SharePoint 2019, Mattermost, and Zoom

3. OIP issued guidance in 2017 encouraging agencies to regularly review their FOIA websites to ensure that they contain essential resources, and are informative and user-friendly. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA website(s) during the reporting period to ensure it addresses the elements noted in the guidance?

Answer: Yes.

4. Did all four of your agency's quarterly reports for Fiscal Year 2021 appear on your agency's website and on FOIA.gov?

Answer: Yes.

5. If your agency did not successfully post all quarterly reports, with information appearing on FOIA.gov, please explain why and provide your agency's plan for ensuring that such reporting is successful in Fiscal Year 2022.

Answer: N/A.

6. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires all agencies to post the raw statistical data used to compile their Annual FOIA Reports. Please provide the link to this posting for your agency's Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report and, if available, for your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report.

Answer: CEQ's FOIA Annual Reports are posted at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/foia>.

7. Optional -- Please describe:

- Best practices used in greater utilizing technology
- Any challenges your agency faces in this area

Answer: CEQ has modest resources and must coordinate with the EOP Office of Administration on the adoption of any new technologies.

## Section V: Steps Taken to Improve Timeliness in Responding to Requests and Reducing Backlogs



The Department of Justice has emphasized the importance of improving timeliness in responding to requests. This section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report addresses both time limits and backlog reduction. Backlog reduction is measured both in terms of numbers of backlogged requests or appeals and by looking at whether agencies closed their ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations.

For the figures required in this Section, please use the numbers contained in the specified sections of your agency's FY 2020 and 2021 Annual FOIA Reports.

#### A. Simple Track

Section VII.A of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "FOIA Requests – Response Time for All Processed Requests," includes figures that show your agency's average response times for processed requests. For agencies utilizing a multi-track system to process requests, there is a category for "simple" requests, which are those requests that are placed in the agency's fastest (non-expedited) track, based on the low volume and/or simplicity of the records requested.

1. Does your agency utilize a separate track for simple requests?

Answer: For reporting purposes, CEQ labels each FOIA request as simple or complex. CEQ prioritizes cases by striving to achieve the lowest average wait time for requestors.

2. If your agency uses a separate track for simple requests, according to Annual FOIA Report section VII.A, was the agency overall average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer in Fiscal Year 2021?

Answer: For FY 2021, the average number of days to process simple requests was 72.73 days.

3. Please provide the percentage of requests processed by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021 that were placed in your simple track. Please use the following calculation based on the data from your Annual FOIA Report: (processed simple requests from Section VII.C.1) divided by (requests processed from Section V.A.) x 100.

Answer: CEQ identified 20 percent of FY 2021 perfected requests as "simple" requests.

4. If your agency does not track simple requests separately, was the average number of days to process all non-expedited requests twenty working days or fewer?

Answer: N/A.

#### B. Backlogs

When answering these questions, please refer to your Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report, Sections XII.D-E, which compare the numbers of requests and appeals received, processed, and backlogged between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021.

## BACKLOGGED REQUESTS

5. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2021, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.2, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2020?

Answer: Yes.

6. If not, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.1, did your agency process more requests during Fiscal Year 2021 than it did during Fiscal Year 2020?

Answer: N/A.

7. If your agency's request backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2021, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able to reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:

- An increase in the number of incoming requests.
- A loss of staff.
- An increase in the complexity of the requests received. If possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase.
- Impact of COVID-19 and workplace and safety precautions
- Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible.

Answer: N/A.

8. If you had a request backlog please report the percentage of requests that make up the backlog out of the total number of requests received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged requests from Section XII.A) divided by (requests received from Section V.A) x 100. This number can be greater than 100%. If your agency has no request backlog, please answer with "N/A."

Answer: The percentage of requests that make up the backlog out of the total number of requests CEQ received in FY 2021 is 35.23 percent (37 out of 105).

## BACKLOGGED APPEALS

9. If your agency had a backlog of appeals at the close of Fiscal Year 2021, according to Section XII.E.2 of the Annual FOIA Report, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2020?

Answer: Yes.

10. If not, according to section XII.E.1 of the Annual FOIA Report, did your agency process more appeals during Fiscal Year 2021 than it did during Fiscal Year 2020?

Answer: N/A.

11. If your agency's appeal backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2021, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able to reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:

- An increase in the number of incoming appeals.
- A loss of staff.
- An increase in the complexity of the requests received. If possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase.
- Impact of COVID-19 and workplace and safety precautions.
- Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible.

Answer: N/A.

12. If you had an appeal backlog please report the percentage of appeals that make up the backlog out of the total number of appeals received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged appeals from Section XII.A) divided by (appeals received from Section VI.A) x 100. This number can be greater than 100%. If your agency did not receive any appeals in Fiscal Year 2021 and/or has no appeal backlog, please answer with "N/A."

Answer: N/A.

### C. Backlog Reduction Plans

13. In the 2021 guidelines for Chief FOIA Officer Reports, any agency with a backlog of over 1000 requests in Fiscal Year 2020 was asked to provide a plan for achieving backlog reduction in the year ahead. Did your agency implement a backlog reduction plan last year? If so, describe your agency's efforts in implementing this plan and note if your agency was able to achieve backlog reduction in Fiscal Year 2021?

Answer: N/A.

14. If your agency had a backlog of more than 1,000 requests in Fiscal Year 2021, please explain your agency's plan to reduce this backlog during Fiscal Year 2022. In particular, please also detail how your agency developed and plans to execute your backlog reduction plans.

Answer: N/A.

### D. Status of Oldest Requests, Appeals, and Consultations

Section VII.E, entitled "Pending Requests – Ten Oldest Pending Requests," Section VI.C.(5), entitled "Ten Oldest Pending Administrative Appeals," and Section XII.C., entitled "Consultations on FOIA Requests – Ten Oldest Consultations Received from Other Agencies and Pending at Your Agency," show the ten oldest pending requests, appeals, and consultations. You should refer to these numbers from your Annual FOIA Reports for both Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2021 when completing this section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

## OLDEST REQUESTS

15. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest pending perfected requests that were reported in Section VII.E. of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

Answer: No.

16. If no, please provide the number of these requests your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.E of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest requests to close, please indicate that.

Answer: In FY 2021, CEQ closed 4 of its 10 oldest requests that CEQ reported pending in its Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report.

17. Beyond work on the ten oldest requests, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending requests.

CEQ continued to employ two temporary FOIA specialists during the reporting period to assist with the agency backlog. CEQ focused on addressing older requests and successfully decreased its backlog in FY 2021.

## TEN OLDEST APPEALS

18. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest appeals that were reported pending in Section VI.C.5 of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

Answer: Yes. CEQ closed 1 of 1 ten oldest appeals from FY20.

19. If no, please provide the number of these appeals your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VI.C.(5) of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest appeals to close, please indicate that.

Answer: N/A.

20. Beyond work on the ten oldest appeals, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending appeals.

Answer: CEQ currently has no backlogged or pending appeals.

## TEN OLDEST CONSULTATIONS

21. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest consultations that were reported pending in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

Answer: Yes. CEQ closed 1 of 1 ten oldest consults from FY20.

22. If no, please provide the number of these consultations your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest consultations to close, please indicate that.

Answer: N/A.

#### E. Additional Information on Ten Oldest Requests, Appeals, and Consultations & Plans

23. Briefly explain any obstacles your agency faced in closing its ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations from Fiscal Year 2020.

Answer: CEQ's ten oldest requests not closed in FY 2021 contain voluminous amounts of records (tens of thousands).

24. If your agency was unable to close any of its ten oldest requests because you were waiting to hear back from other agencies on consultations you sent, please provide the date the request was initially received by your agency, the date when your agency sent the consultation, and the date when you last contacted the agency where the consultation was pending.

Answer: N/A.

25. If your agency did not close its ten oldest pending requests, appeals, or consultations, please provide a plan describing how your agency intends to close those "ten oldest" requests, appeals, and consultations during Fiscal Year 2022.

Answer: CEQ will continue to prioritize a portion of its personnel resources to process CEQ's oldest FOIA requests. CEQ continues to employ contract FOIA specialists to assist with its oldest requests.

#### F. Success Stories

Out of all the activities undertaken by your agency since March 2021 to increase transparency and improve FOIA administration, please briefly describe here at least one success story that you would like to highlight as emblematic of your agency's efforts. The success story can come from any one of the five key areas, but should not be something that you have reported in a prior year. As noted above, these agency success stories will be highlighted during Sunshine Week by OIP. To facilitate this process, all agencies should use bullets to describe their success story and limit their text to a half page. The success story is designed to be a quick summary of key achievements. A complete description of all your efforts will be contained in the body of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

Answer: In FY 2021, CEQ's FOIA team continued to operate remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic while processing more FOIA requests than the previous fiscal year, reducing its request backlog, and eliminating its appeals backlog. Even with its limited resources and a

significant increase in consultation from other agencies, CEQ accomplished this by streamlining its interagency consultation process and improving workflow tracking.