

For: Washington, DC, and Kansas City, MO FOIA Offices, and State and County Offices

USDA Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Training for FOIA Processors

Approved by: Administrator



1 Overview

A Background

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), enacted in 1966, establishes a statutory right of public access to Executive Branch information in the Federal Government. The basic purpose of the FOIA, as explained by the United States Supreme Court, is “to ensure an informed citizenry, vital to the functioning of a democratic society, needed to check against corruption and to hold the governors accountable to the governed.” A democracy requires accountability and accountability requires transparency. FOIA encourages accountability through transparency.

In 2015, Secretary Vilsack recognized the important work being done by USDA FOIA processors Department-wide. He asked all USDA employees to renew their commitment to open government and transparency by reviewing the content of a USDA introduction to FOIA training module, available on AgLearn, and by supporting FOIA processors in their efforts to ensure that USDA complies with the both the letter and the spirit of the law.

In support of the FOIA program, the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) developed a training course expressly designed for USDA employees charged with processing FOIA requests. The first six lessons of this course are now available on AgLearn. Together, they provide both an introduction to how the FOIA program is managed at USDA and in-depth coverage of procedural issues associated with processing FOIA requests at the USDA. Future lessons will cover the nine FOIA exemptions and advanced FOIA topics such as adjudicating FOIA appeals and FOIA litigation and the relationship of FOIA and the Privacy Act of 1974. The following lessons are currently available:

- Lesson 1: FOIA Overview
- Lesson 2: Understanding FOIA Requests
- Lesson 3: Receiving FOIA Requests
- Lesson 4: Processing FOIA Requests in a Timely Manner
- Lesson 5: FOIA Fees
- Lesson 6: Searching for Responsive Records.

Disposal Date	Distribution
November 1, 2016	Washington, DC, and Kansas City, MO, FOIA Offices and State Offices; State Offices relay to County Offices

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1 Overview (Continued)

B Purpose

This notice advises National, State, and County FSA employees charged with processing FOIA requests that this much-needed training is now available in AgLearn.

2 Training Guidance

A Training Lessons 1 through 6

All FSA employees who process FOIA requests on a full-time or collateral basis should plan to complete this training by the end of calendar year 2016. These six lessons should be taken in order, as concepts introduced in earlier lessons are expanded on in later lessons.

The full name of the course as posted in the AgLearn catalog is *USDA's FOIA Training for FOIA Professionals Lessons 1 through 6*. To locate it in the AgLearn catalog, enter the word "FOIA" in the Search Catalog screen. There are other FOIA training courses in the AgLearn catalog that may also be of interest to FSA FOIA processors. However, none of these courses provide an in-depth look at the training material.

B Future Training Lessons

The OCIO plans to roll out additional FOIA training lessons in the near future that will provide guidance on:

- reviewing records for release,
- applying each of the nine FOIA exemptions,
- adjudicating FOIA appeals,
- what FOIA processors should know about FOIA litigation,
- how FOIA interacts with the Privacy Act of 1974 with respect to access requests. The Washington, D.C. National FOIA Office shall notify State FOIA Coordinators of the availability of each new lesson as it is released. State FOIA Coordinators shall notify County Offices, of the availability of each new lesson. While subsequent lessons may be taken out of order, all FSA employees who process FOIA requests on a full-time or collateral basis are urged to ensure that they complete all of them, as they are released, to further their skills in processing FOIA requests.

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3 General Information

A Contacts

IF there is a question about...	THEN...
AgLearn technical assistance	do any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in AgLearn, CLICK “Help” • in AgLearn, CLICK “Contact Us” • call 1-866-633-9394 • or send an email to AgLearnHelp@genphysics.com.
eAuthentication account or password reset	contact ITS National Help Desk at 1-800-457-3642 (Option 1).
this Notice	contact Kent Politsch, Acting FOIA Officer/Chief of Public Affairs Branch by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail at kent.politsch@wdc.usda.gov • telephone at 202-720-7163.
the content of the AgLearn training	contact Alexis Graves, Departmental FOIA Officer by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail at alexis.graves@ocio.usda.gov • telephone at 202-690-3318.
National Office employee training administration	contact Marie Hubbard, HRD, by either of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail at marie.hubbard@wdc.usda.gov • telephone at 202-401-0373.
Kansas City, St. Louis, or APFO employee training administration (locating the course on your “To Do List”)	contact Mark Nelson by either of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail at mark.nelson@kcc.usda.gov • telephone at 816-926-3420.
State and County Office training administration	contact either the State training officer or AgLearn lead.

B Reasonable Accommodations

Persons who require special accommodations to complete in this training should contact their supervisor or local help desk. These AgLearn training lessons have been certified as 508-compliant.