CLASSIFYING RECORDS

- **SUBJECT FILE**

- **CASE OR CASE WORKING PAPERS**

- **Managing Working Files**
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SUBJECT FILE

1. Read and analyze the document to determine its major subject–why it was written as it applies to your organization. The following may help establish the subject (a) subject line, if any, (b) key phrase and ideas, and (c) addressee or originator.

2. Check to see if this subject is covered in the APHIS Records Management Handbook under this or another applicable term. If there is an existing applicable code, write it in the upper right corner of the document and place it in that file.

3. If you can't find an existing APHIS code that seems to fit and you think you want to create a new code for it, then contact the Records Management Officer (RMO) by phone or in writing. The RMO will want to talk to you over the phone or in a meeting to see if it can be covered by an existing code. If a new code is needed, the RMO will work with the program to write a new section, then send an SF-115, Request for Records Disposition Authority, to NARA for approval. This will give you (a) an approved code, and (b) an official disposition schedule for the new code.

CASE OR CASE WORKING PAPERS

1.   Read and analyze the document to determine its subject as it pertains to your organization.

2.   Check to see if this general subject is covered in the APHIS Records Management Handbook under this or another applicable term.

        a.   Create case files as needed under any applicable APHIS subject classification.

        b.   Use the disposition schedule for that classification to determine the retention period for all case records under that classification.

Managing Working Files

1.   When it comes to describing working files, the old saying comes to mind:

        "I can't define wahat it is, but I know it when I see it."

3.   According to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), working files consist of documents "such as rough notes, calculations, or drafts assembles or created and used to prepare or analyze other documents." But ask most APHIS employees, and they will say that the files in their filing cabinets are their "working files." So who is right?

4.   The answer is that NARA is right in theory, and APHIS definition fits far to many offices at APHIS. Why? Because too may APHIS programs have lost the distinction between "official files" and "working files." One o the biggest challenges to records management in APHIS is to reintroduce this vital distinction which is fundamental to effective management of our records. This is done by developing recordkeeping requirements for each of the Agency's major program and administrative files.

5.   One function or recordkeeping requirements is to identify what documents need to be included in the official file. In fact, the easiest way to define working files is to define official files first. Within APHIS, official records are defined as:

        1.   ...any final product related to administration, managements, enforcement, regulations or other Agency function and all documentation necessary to support that document, the decision trail leading up to it and the actions that result from it.

        Working papers are everything else.

Why are the working files question important? As long as they consist only of "rough notes, collocations, or drafts" working files are not a major problem. But professional staff frequently maintain a substantial portion of their project documentation in "working files."

When working files contain records needed to document program activities, they pose two problems. If working files are poorly organized and inscrutable to anyone but the creator (which they often are), identifying record material to document program activity is difficult. If staff mix record and nonrecord materials in one voluminous "working files (as they frequently do), the Agency is forced to manage an even larger volume of material that is necessary.

Everyone creates working files and they are necessary to keep operations running smoothly. How to manage them is the question. The basic consideration are to make sure that records

needed to document Agency activity are separated and filed in official files, and that the volume of working files is kept to a minimum by constant weeding.

Programs often take one of two approaches to manage working files. The first approach is to minimize either existence by having staff create an official file when the action is initiated, and file the official records and only official records in it. This is the best solution from a theoretical perspective, and it works especially well for repetitive actions where approvals are required, such as the issuing of permits travel vouchers, purchase requests, or approval of directives.

In other cases staff retain most of all of the papes until a specified milestone is reached or the activity or task is completed. At that time, an official file is compiled. This works well when several individuals are contributing to one product or result, or when projects are unique. Some programs also use this approach in compiling administrative records.

Managing Working Files

Supporting Materials and Working Files

1.   Supporting mateials are not working files. True supporting materials are documents that are necessary to substantiate the final document or decision trail. Supporting materials are part of the official record, although they may be filed separately if volume warrants.

2.   What binds these two approaches together is that there is an established profile for what types of documents need to be included in the official file. Staff then assess the value of their documents against this benchmark to know which records in their possession need to be filed and retained, and which one can be safely recycles or destroyed.

3.   What if there is no guidance?

        Unfortunately not all programs have guidance on what is to be included in the official. What then? Do you have to save everything? No, but you need to be careful as you sort through the documents before you discard anything. First double check to make sure that no guidance does exist. If thee is none, develop an approach to the materials using the general guidelines listed below, and discuss it with your supervisor, and with counsel it there is a likelihood of litigation.

Managing Working Files

Guidelines for handling common types of documents

1.   Records Material: Develop an plan to organize the material and file according to the file plan. If the file is large, consult with your records manager on whether it makes sense to set up a major file for the major documents and a separate one for support materials, or to set up a case file.

2.   Nonrecord and Technical Reference Material: Extra copies or articles, periodicals, reports, documents, studies, vendor catalogs, and similar materials that are needed for convenience or reference but are not part of the official file. Such items should be destroyed as soon s they are no longer needed.

3.   Suspense or Tickler Copies: Extra copies of Documents to remind persons or actions to be completed by a certain date should be destroyed one the action has been completed.

4.   Telephone slips, notes, E-mails messages that are facilitative and not substantive in nature (e.g., "Mike, please call Ann about the project." Destroy when no longer needed.

5.   Telephone slips, notes, E-mail messages that are substantive in nature. Either retain or create official documents, such as memos for the records summarizing substantive conversations, meetings, telephone calls, and the like, and destroy the notes.

6.   Drafts that are not circulated for comment or review can be destroyed when no longer needed.

7.   Drafts that contain substantive changes need more analysis. If the changes re importation, you may want to retain them as supporting documentation. In most cases, however, it is sufficient to summarize the comments in a memo for the record. In the case of documents circulates for comment, you can always keep an official full copy and then retain only the annotated pages of the copies wit comments.