

CHAPTER 4

ELECTRONIC RECORDKEEPING

The increased use of personal computers and other office equipment results in more employees, ranging from senior program officials to clerks, making decisions concerning the maintenance, accessibility and preservation of information. Furthermore, the increased use of electronic mail further limits the requirement for traditional paper documents, so many records may never appear on paper.

Easily applied rules for the creation, maintenance, and disposition of documents created, stored, and transmitted in electronic media do not exist. The use of electronic media can present documentation problems for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service since records created electronically can become the basis for official policy decisions. When this is the case, traditional records management practices must be modified to avoid problems of unauthorized disposal of records. The practices must be designed to ensure that (1) the integrity of records is maintained, (2) records are retrievable, (3) only authorized records disposal occur, and (4) records having continuing value can be transferred easily to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

The following guidelines issued by the NARA a range of issues concerning the creation, maintenance, disposition, and preservation of electronically-generated and/or stored information. The guidelines address the following:

- Accurate Labeling and Indexing
- Retention
- Backup System
- Disposal
- Electrical Power
- Diskette Care and Handling
- Electronic Mail

1. ACCURATE LABELING AND INDEXING

To retrieve information created and stored electronically, the user is dependent upon "labels," both external (on the outside of the diskette) and internal (recorded on the "index" of the diskette/disk). Accurate and complete labels are essential to ensure that Agency personnel can identify information on electronic media. Insufficient external labels on word processor diskette inhibit the ability to identify the contents. The external label should include: File plan code established for your office, subject, and inclusive dates.

EXAMPLE: ADIS 5 CONTROL
Case Files FY 98

Check with your local Records Management Officer for a copy of your office's file plan. This information also should be entered on the internal index of the word processor diskette as part of the file title with specific dates for each document. On the personal computer, enter only the file code and date. Additionally, the index should be printed out to ensure access. Most users of word processors prefer to treat each diskette as a "file drawer," containing similar documents (position descriptions, personnel actions, etc.). Others have one or more diskettes per person, and put all work by an individual, regardless of subject, on a diskette. Regardless of what method is used, accurate and complete external labels are necessary.

Users of personal computers will treat each disk as a "file cabinet", containing a wide variety of subjects. The internal "label" could include: file plan code and the date the document is created.

EXAMPLE: LAT 7-3 Human Health Test

Check with your local Records Management Officer for a copy of the file plan.

2. RETENTION

The fact that information is created or stored electronically has no bearing upon whether that information is a permanent record, temporary record, or reference material. Status is determined by the same criteria for all information, regardless of the medium in which it is created or stored. But, ensuring the retention of information stored electronically is not as simple as ensuring the retention of information stored on microform or paper. The decision about whether an electronic document is a record needs to be made much earlier than for paper because of the ease of erasing or changing the document.

The record status of electronically stored drafts of policy documents should be continually reevaluated as changes are made. Substantive updates to such electronic documents probably constitute new records while minor changes probably do not.

With a personal computer, a "backup" is needed for record material. This can be done by periodically adding new information to diskettes (daily, weekly, etc., depending on volume).

All "record" material received by electronic mail should be converted to paper and retained until its disposition date. Many electronic mail messages contain reference material rather than record material and can be read and deleted.

If the same information is stored on more than one medium (such as paper and disk/diskette), the originator and the local Records Management Officer should determine which set of information constitutes the record. Then, the material on the other medium can be considered reference copies and be discarded.

3. BACKUP SYSTEM

Information created electronically that contains "record" material that is vital to the Agency should have a backup system. This can be done by duplicating the material on paper, diskette, tape, or microform. Consult with your local Records Management Officer for the best backup system for your office.

4. DISPOSAL

As with paper records, electronic records only can be disposed of according to the approved Animal and Plant Health Inspection (APHIS) Records Schedules in this Handbook. However, there are certain considerations when disposing of records stored electronically. The compactness of electronic media may present problems. At times they are stored in nontraditional locations (like work stations) since they do not present the space problems evident with paper records. As a result, some may become less diligent in disposing of records at the time of their authorized destruction. The failure to dispose of records in a timely manner undermines the efficiency of the office as well as the records management program.

5. ELECTRIC POWER

Poor quality electrical power may cause equipment to malfunction and affect electronic records. Check with your facilities staff to see what steps need to be taken to prevent problems of this type. Some problems can be solved with inexpensive devices such as a surge protector. More serious problems may require additional electrical circuits.

6. DISKETTE CARE AND HANDLING

A tremendous amount of information in EPA is maintained on flexible diskettes. Below are practical guidelines that will assist you in protecting this information.

- a. A clean working environment is of utmost importance. A dirty diskette surface is a serious cause of data losses. Finger oil, smoke, food and drinks, abrasive materials (such as dust or filings), pencil eraser debris, etc., are typical contaminants.

- b. Never make finger contact with exposed media surface through the elongated, oval slot in the envelope where the head-to-disk access contact is made. Also avoid touching the exposed media surface area near the hub.
- c. Have the diskette drive cleaned regularly, particularly at the insertion slot position. Dirt and dust can be picked up by the diskette during insertion. NOTE: Your maintenance agreement should provide for regular cleaning of the drive. Check with your administrative officer.
- d. Have the read/write heads cleaned on a regular basis. NOTE: Your maintenance agreement should provide for regular cleaning of the read/write heads. Check with your administrative officer.
- e. Always return the diskette to its protective envelope after it is used.
- f. Don't flex or fold the diskette. Avoid bending the diskette when loading into or extracting it from the drive.
- g. Don't put a rubber band or paper clip onto the diskette envelope.
- h. Always write on the label before it is applied to the diskette. However, if the original label is used, do not write on it with a ball point pen; use a soft, fiber tipped pen. (A ball point pen can emboss the diskette.)
- i. Never erase the label on a diskette. The pressure and the erasure remains may cause damage.
- j. Do not use or store in extreme temperature and humidity. As an example, a closed, hot, stationary vehicle in the sunlight may cause damage.
- k. Don't place objects (coffee cups, staplers, etc.) on diskettes.
- l. Never place a magnet of any kind onto the envelope surface of a diskette. This includes typical bar magnets found in offices (coat and picture hanger magnets, flashlight magnets, magnetized screwdrivers, etc.).
- m. Maintain a schedule for checking, cleaning, or replacing air filters. Dirt causes media damage.
- n. Make copies of vital or master diskettes and store in an alternate location.
- o. Store diskettes in a vertical position in an appropriate storage container, preferably near the computer or word processor with which the diskettes are used.

- p. Do not place electronic recording media near a telephone where the telephone's magnetic pulses could cause damage to the media.

7. ELECTRONIC MAIL

- a. E-mail messages are records when they:
 - (1) Are made or received by an agency under Federal law or in connection with public business; and
 - (2) Are preserved or are appropriate for preservation as evidence of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the Government, or because of the information value of the data they contain.
- b. Principal categories of materials to be preserved are:
 - (1) Records that document the formulation and execution of basic policies and decisions and the taking of necessary actions.
 - (2) Records that document important meetings.
 - (3) Records that facilitate action by agency officials and their successors.
 - (4) Records that make possible a proper scrutiny by the Congress or by duly authorized agencies of the Government.
 - (5) Records that protect the financial, legal, and other rights of the Government and of persons directly affected by the Government's actions.
- c. E-mail messages that may constitute Federal records are:
 - (1) E-mail providing key substantive comments on a draft action memorandum, if the E-mail message adds to a proper understanding of the formulation or execution of Agency action.
 - (2) E-mail providing documentation of significant Agency decisions and commitments reached orally (person-to-person, by telecommunications, or in conference) and not otherwise documented in Agency files.
 - (3) E-mail conveying information of value on important Agency activities, if the E-mail message adds to a proper understanding of Agency operations and responsibilities.
- d. Points to remember about E-mail are:

- (1) Agency E-mail systems are for "official use" only by authorized personnel.
- (2) Before deleting any E-mail message, the author should determine whether it meets the legal definition of a record and, if so, preserve a copy of the message.
- (3) Printed messages kept as a record should contain essential transmission and receipt data; if not, print the data or annotate the printed copy.
- (4) Printed messages and essential transmission and receipt data should be filed with related files of the office.
- (5) Messages that are not records may be deleted.
- (6) When E-mail is retained as a record, the periods of its retention are governed by records retention schedules.