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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Washington, DC 20515-6115

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April 15, 2008

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GREGG A. ROTHSCCHILD, CHIEF COUNSEL

The Honorable Henrietta Holsman Fore
Administrator
U.S. Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20523

Dear Administrator Fore:

Under Rules X and XI of the Rules of the U.S. House of Representatives, the Committee on Energy and Commerce and its Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations are investigating the restriction of scientific inquiry in the Population Information Online (POPLINE) database.

I understand that POPLINE, the world's largest database on reproductive health, is maintained by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for Communication Programs. It is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). According to media reports, Sandra Jordan of the USAID Office of Population and Reproductive Health indicated, "USAID made an inquiry to POPLINE about six weeks ago, when the agency found information in the database that did not follow criteria that POPLINE has for the site," Jordan said. "The materials on POPLINE about which USAID made its inquiries were abortion-advocacy materials...Afterward, POPLINE administrators then made the decision to restrict 'abortion' as a search term."

I am concerned that the restriction of certain search terms in the POPLINE database is an ideological decision, and not in line with the spirit of free scientific inquiry intended by the creation of such a database. In addition, I am concerned that such a complete restriction was mandated after only two specific items were identified as questionable by POPLINE's funding agency.

Therefore, you are asked to provide the following to the Committee:

1. All records relating to the awarding of the POPLINE database to Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health;
2. All records of communications between Johns Hopkins and the U.S. Agency for International Development relating to the POPLINE database;
3. All records relating to the identification of the “information in the database that did not follow criteria that POPLINE has for the site”;
4. All records relating to the decision to make “abortion” or any other word or term a “stop word” in the POPLINE database;
5. The names and titles of those officials in USAID who asked for or approved the decision to make “abortion” or any other word or term a “stop word” in the POPLINE database;
6. Please identify in writing the “criteria that POPLINE has for the site” that identified abortion-related items as inappropriate for the database;
7. A written explanation as to whether USAID rules permit administrators of a federally-funded database to restrict certain search terms; and
8. A list of all other databases funded by USAID and maintained by non-Government entities.

Please deliver copies of the requested records to the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, Room 316, Ford House Office Building, by no later than two weeks from the date of this letter. Please note that for the purpose of responding to this request, the terms “record” and “relating” should be interpreted in accordance with the attachment to this letter. After review of the records, additional records and/or staff interviews with USAID officials may be required.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. If you have any questions about this request, please have your staff contact John F. Sopko or Paul Jung with the Committee staff at (202) 226-2424.

The Honorable Henrietta Holsman Fore
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Sincerely,



JOHN D. DINGELL
CHAIRMAN

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Bart Stupak, Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable John Shimkus, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

ATTACHMENT

1. The term "records" is to be construed in the broadest sense and shall mean any written or graphic material, however produced or reproduced, of any kind or description, consisting of the original and any non-identical copy (whether different from the original because of notes made on or attached to such copy or otherwise) and drafts and both sides thereof, whether printed or recorded electronically or magnetically or stored in any type of data bank, including, but not limited to, the following: correspondence, memoranda, records, summaries of personal conversations or interviews, minutes or records of meetings or conferences, opinions or reports of consultants, projections, statistical statements, drafts, contracts, agreements, purchase orders, invoices, confirmations, telegraphs, telexes, agendas, books, notes, pamphlets, periodicals, reports, studies, evaluations, opinions, logs, diaries, desk calendars, appointment books, tape recordings, video recordings, e-mails, voice mails, computer tapes, or other computer stored matter, magnetic tapes, microfilm, microfiche, punch cards, all other records kept by electronic, photographic, or mechanical means, charts, photographs, notebooks, drawings, plans, inter-office communications, intra-office and intra-departmental communications, transcripts, checks and canceled checks, bank statements, ledgers, books, records or statements of accounts, and papers and things similar to any of the foregoing, however denominated.
2. The terms "relating," or "relate" as to any given subject means anything that constitutes, contains, embodies, identifies, deals with, or is in any manner whatsoever pertinent to that subject, including but not limited to records concerning the preparation of other records.