

# Liftoff for the ERA

The Electronic Records Archives (ERA), which NARA is building to preserve the Federal Government's increasingly vast output of electronic records, is now open for business.

This summer, NARA will begin moving about 3.5 million computer files to ERA. In September, we will begin taking in records from four selected federal agencies, and in January we will be ready for the records of the eight-year administration of President George W. Bush.

ERA's official launch of its initial operating capability (IOC) on June 27 was the latest step in a project whose origins go back to 1970, when NARA first took in electronic records in the form of simple (by today's standards) data files. The agency continued to monitor the growth of electronic records, and in 2000, the ERA program was created.

Our ERA program came into being at a time when advances in technology were rapidly changing the way we communicate with one another and how records of all kinds are created and preserved. Today, new and more sophisticated electronic formats are being developed and made available to the public at a dizzying pace—making some of them obsolete even as they are being



introduced to the public.

This posed a problem for NARA, which has as its mission preserving and making accessible the important records of the Federal Government:

How could an electronic record created with today's computer hardware and software be accessed many years from now with the hardware and software in existence then?

That was NARA's challenge, but now the technology for *preserving* electronic records is beginning to catch up with the technology for *creating* them.

Several years ago, together with Lockheed Martin, NARA created a process for preserving electronic records, ensuring their authenticity, and continuing to provide



public access to them in an environment of rapidly changing technology. The reason for preserving the records, after all, is to be able to use them far into the future.

The solution: the Electronic Records Archives.

In ERA's initial operating capability stage, it will accept records from four Federal agencies that have agreed to be the first to use the ERA. They are the Patent and Trademark Office, the Naval Oceanographic Office, the National Nuclear Security Administration, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Working with these agencies will be staff from the Lifecycle Management Division (NWML), Access Programs (NWC), and the Office of Regional Records Services (NR).

Of course, ERA will change how NARA does business, both internally and externally. But even the most complex software system cannot take the place of a well-trained archivist. If anything, NARA will need more staff, not fewer, to handle the enormous volume of electronic records to come.

How will things change? For the most part, the electronic records schedule will be the same as the current paper schedule. What is currently required will still be required, and what is optional now will still be mostly optional. However, new technical information will be required that will result in making the archival materials more useful and accessible to all researchers.

As ERA continues to evolve, more staff members and more Government agencies will use it on a daily basis. In a schedule that remains to be completed, the public will eventually become ERA users as well. First public access is currently projected for 2010, with full operating capability projected for 2011.

The next step for ERA is the deployment of the EOP System, which is focused on taking in the records of the Executive Office of the President when President Bush leaves office in January 2009.

The EOP system will allow ERA to take in records and search them more rapidly—while continuing to lay a solid foundation for the subsequent steps in bringing ERA to full capability. This new increment will add staff from the future George W. Bush Presidential Library to the list of users of the ERA system.

Fielding a system of this size and complexity is no simple task, and the ERA team is to be commended. There are also many others to thank for helping to bring this project to fruition including those in NWML, NWME, NWC, NR, the Office of Informational Services (NH) as well as NARA subject-matter experts who have served on special teams advising ERA developers on building and testing ERA. Also to be thanked are members of the Advisory Committee on the ERA (ACERA), and many others who played a part in ERA.

The future of ERA is exciting and full of challenges. As we travel down the road to full operating capability, for all of us—now and in future—the work continues . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Allen Weinstein'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN  
Archivist of the United States

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in the July/August 2008 issue  
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