

§ 286.28 General provisions. (EXTRACT)

(d) *Fee waivers.* (1) Documents shall be furnished without charge, or at a charge reduced below fees assessed to the categories of requesters in paragraph (e) of this section when the Component determines that waiver or reduction of the fees is in the public interest because furnishing the information is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the Department of Defense and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.

(2) When assessable costs for a FOIA request total \$15.00 or less, fees shall be waived automatically for all requesters, regardless of category.

(3) Decisions to waive or reduce fees that exceed the automatic waiver threshold shall be made on a case-by-case basis, consistent with the following factors:

(i) Disclosure of the information “is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the Government.”

(A) *The subject of the request.* Components should analyze whether the subject matter of the request involves issues that will significantly contribute to the public understanding of the operations or activities of the Department of Defense. Requests for records in the possession of the Department of Defense which were originated by non-government organizations and are sought for their intrinsic content, rather than informative value, will likely not contribute to public understanding of the operations or activities of the Department of Defense. An example of such records might be press clippings, magazine articles, or records forwarding a particular opinion or concern from a member of the public regarding a DoD activity. Similarly, disclosures of records of considerable age may or may not bear directly on the current activities of the Department of Defense; however, the age of a particular record shall not be the sole criteria for denying relative significance under this factor. It is possible to envisage an informative issue concerning the current activities of the Department of Defense, based upon historical documentation. Requests of this nature must be closely reviewed consistent with the requester's stated purpose for desiring the records and the potential for public understanding of the operations and activities of the Department of Defense.

(B) *The informative value of the information to be disclosed.* This factor requires a close analysis of the substantive contents of a record, or portion of the record, to determine whether disclosure is meaningful, and shall inform the public on the operations or activities of the Department of Defense. While the subject of a request may contain information that concerns operations or activities of the Department of Defense, it may not always hold great potential for contributing to a meaningful understanding of these operations or activities. An example of such would be a previously released record that has been heavily redacted, the balance of which may contain only random words, fragmented sentences, or paragraph headings. A determination as to whether a record in this situation will contribute to the public understanding of the operations or activities of the Department of Defense must be approached with caution, and carefully weighed against the arguments offered by the requester. Another example is information already known to be in the public domain. Disclosure of duplicative, or nearly identical information already existing in the public domain may add no meaningful new information concerning the operations and activities of the Department of Defense.

(C) *The contribution to an understanding of the subject by the general public likely to result from disclosure.* The key element in determining the applicability of this factor is whether disclosure will inform, or have the potential to inform the public, rather than simply the individual requester or small segment of interested persons. The identity of the requester is essential in this situation in order to determine whether such requester has the capability and intention to disseminate the information to the public. Mere assertions of plans to author a book, researching a particular subject, doing doctoral dissertation work, or indigence are insufficient without demonstrating the capacity to further disclose the information in a manner that will be informative to the general public. Requesters should be asked to describe their

qualifications, the nature of their research, the purpose of the requested information, and their intended means of dissemination to the public.

(D) *The significance of the contribution to public understanding.* In applying this factor, Components must differentiate the relative significance or impact of the disclosure against the current level of public knowledge, or understanding which exists before the disclosure. In other words, will disclosure on a current subject of wide public interest be unique in contributing unknown facts, thereby enhancing public knowledge, or will it basically duplicate what is already known by the general public? A decision regarding significance requires objective judgment, rather than subjective determination, and must be applied carefully to determine whether disclosure will likely lead to a significant understanding of the issue. Components shall not make value judgments as to whether the information is important enough to be made public.

(ii) Disclosure of the information "is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester."

(A) *The existence and magnitude of a commercial interest.* If the request is determined to be of a commercial interest, Components should address the magnitude of that interest to determine if the requester's commercial interest is primary, as opposed to any secondary personal or non-commercial interest. In addition to profitmaking organizations, individual persons or other organizations may have a commercial interest in obtaining certain records. Where it is difficult to determine whether the requester is of a commercial nature, Components may draw inference from the requester's identity and circumstances of the request. In such situations, the provisions of paragraph (e) of this section apply. Components are reminded that in order to apply the commercial standards of the FOIA, the requester's commercial benefit must clearly override any personal or non-profit interest.

(B) *The primary interest in disclosure.* Once a requester's commercial interest has been determined, Components should then determine if the disclosure would be primarily in that interest. This requires a balancing test between the commercial interest of the request against any public benefit to be derived as a result of that disclosure. Where the public interest is served above and beyond that of the requester's commercial interest, a waiver or reduction of fees would be appropriate. Conversely, even if a significant public interest exists, and the relative commercial interest of the requester is determined to be greater than the public interest, then a waiver or reduction of fees would be inappropriate. As examples, news media organizations have a commercial interest as business organizations; however, their inherent role of disseminating news to the general public can ordinarily be presumed to be of a primary interest. Therefore, any commercial interest becomes secondary to the primary interest in serving the public. Similarly, scholars writing books or engaged in other forms of academic research, may recognize a commercial benefit, either directly, or indirectly (through the institution they represent); however, normally such pursuits are primarily undertaken for educational purposes, and the application of a fee charge would be inappropriate. Conversely, data brokers or others who merely compile government information for marketing can normally be presumed to have an interest primarily of a commercial nature.

(4) Components are reminded that the factors and examples used in this subsection are not all inclusive. Each fee decision must be considered on a case-by-case basis and upon the merits of the information provided in each request. When the element of doubt as to whether to charge or waive the fee cannot be clearly resolved, Components should rule in favor of the requester.

(5) In addition, the following circumstances describe situations where waiver or reduction of fees are most likely to be warranted:

(i) A record is voluntarily created to prevent an otherwise burdensome effort to provide voluminous amounts of available records, including additional information not requested.

(ii) A previous denial of records is reversed in total, or in part, and the assessable costs are not substantial (e.g. \$15.00–\$30.00).