

Chapter 7. VITAL RECORDS

1. **Purpose:** The purpose of a Vital Records program is to prevent the loss of information critical to the continuing operation of Reclamation and to enable Reclamation to resume operations quickly and efficiently in the event of an emergency. The protection and preservation of vital records is essential and each office within Reclamation should properly identify and protect vital records.
2. **Vital Records Plan:** Each office should develop a vital records plan as a part of the overall office Continuity of Operations Plan. The plan should include a description of records that are vital to continued operation of the office or for the protection of legal and financial rights. Refer to the Information Management Handbook, Volume II, Retention Schedules for codes that may contain some vital record materials. **Not all records contained in those designated codes are considered vital records.** The plan should also include specific measures for storing and periodically cycling (updating) copies of those records.
3. **Vital Records Identification:** Vital records are any records, regardless of archival value, that are essential to the functions of Reclamation during and after an emergency. They also include those records essential to the protection of the rights and interests of Reclamation and of the individuals for whose rights and interests it has responsibility. The loss of vital records during a disaster could result in the disruption of essential services, exposure to unplanned expenses of financial settlements or loss of revenue, increased vulnerability to litigation, and loss of productivity due to gaps in information.

Vital records fall into two general categories:

Emergency operating records are vital records essential to the continued functioning or reconstitution of an organization during and after an emergency. Included are: emergency plans and directive(s); orders of succession; delegations of authority; staffing assignments; selected program records needed to continue the most critical agency operations; as well as related policy or procedural records that assist agency staff in conducting operations under emergency conditions and for resuming normal operations after an emergency.

Legal and financial rights records are vital records essential to protect the legal and financial rights of the Government and of the individuals directly affected by its activities. Examples of these records are: records containing proof of ownership, financial interest (social security, payroll, retirement, insurance, and accounts receivable), legal proceeding decisions, contractual obligations, and similar records. These records were formerly defined as "rights-and-interests" records.

Each Office is responsible for identifying their vital records by completing Vital Records Inventory Forms. These forms should indicate not only the current location of vital records but also the location of any security copies.

4. Vital Records Protection: Given the importance of vital records, offices should arrange for offsite storage of copies in a facility not subject to the same emergency or disaster but still reasonably accessible to staff. The storage site for copies of emergency operation records may be different from the storage site for copies of records needed to protect legal rights. Whenever feasible, an office should store copies of emergency-operating records in a properly equipped and environmentally controlled emergency operations center.

Offices should examine several factors when deciding where to store copies of vital records. Copies of emergency operating vital records need to be accessible in a very short period of time for use in the event of an emergency or disaster. Copies of legal and financial records may not be needed as quickly. Offices may store emergency operating records at a site appropriate to their needs or at the Federal Records Center. Agencies should contact NARA first to determine if it has sufficient space to store the records, if frequent cycling of records is required, and what costs the agency may have to incur. An FRC will usually agree to a reimbursable agreement with agencies for records that require frequent cycling. Records needed to protect legal and financial rights may also be stored at any FRC. If vital records are recorded on a medium other than paper, agencies should check with the FRC before initiating the transfer to ensure that appropriate environmentally controlled space is available.

5. Vital Records Periodic Cycling: Periodic cycling (updating) of copies of vital records is essential. The office should decide the frequency of cycling, based on how current its emergency-operating records and records needed to protect rights must be to meet its information needs and responsibilities. Depending on those needs and upon the medium on which the vital record is maintained, cycling may occur daily, weekly, monthly, annually, or at longer intervals.
6. Electronic Records: Vital Records residing in electronic systems should be listed in the Contingency Plans for each IT system, should describe contacts in event of emergencies, and procedures for off-site storage of backup tapes and disks. In the event that an IT system is found to contain vital records, the Contingency Plans for that IT system should be included in the vital record inventory noting which records within the system are considered vital.