

Managing Records for the Long Term - 12363

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) is responsible for managing vast amounts of information documenting historical and current operations. This information is critical to the operations of the DOE Office of Legacy Management. Managing legacy records and information is challenging in terms of accessibility and changing technology. The Office of Legacy Management is meeting these challenges by making records and information management an organizational priority.

The Office of Legacy Management mission is to manage DOE post-closure responsibilities at former Cold War weapons sites to ensure the future protection of human health and the environment. These responsibilities include environmental stewardship and long-term preservation and management of operational and environmental cleanup records associated with each site. A primary organizational goal for the Office of Legacy Management is to “Preserve, Protect, and Share Records and Information.”

INTRODUCTION

Proper records management is crucial to effective environmental stewardship and is required by law. Office of Legacy Management records contain data on compliance with regulatory requirements and the technical remedies for site cleanup, assuring regulators that former Cold War sites do not pose unacceptable human health and environmental risks. As of September 30, 2011, the Office of Legacy Management was managing records and information for 88 sites, which translates into more than 110,000 cubic feet of physical records and 100 terabytes of electronic information.

The Office of Legacy Management successfully manages and preserves this large volume of records through proper storage and efficient indexing, providing easy access to information. The Office of Legacy Management has taken a leading role within DOE by constructing a records storage facility to consolidate the majority of the organization’s record holdings and house an information technology data center.

A strong records management program is important because of the need to respond to internal and external customer requests for records. The Office of Legacy Management will continue to research and apply innovative ways of doing business to ensure that the organization stays at the forefront of effective records and information management.

DISCUSSION

Efficient records management is crucial for the Office of Legacy Management to execute environmental stewardship. It is also required by law. Federal records follow a cradle-to-grave records life cycle that includes records creation or receipt, records maintenance and use, and records disposition, as depicted in Figure 1.

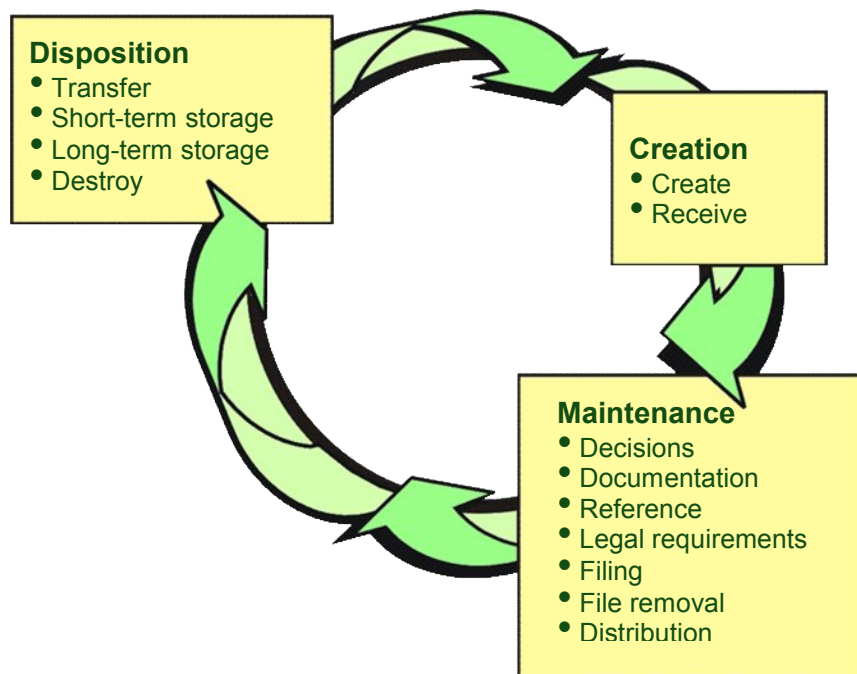


Figure 1. Records life cycle.

Office of Legacy Management records contain data on compliance with regulatory requirements and the technical remedies for cleanup of the sites, assuring regulators that these sites do not pose unacceptable human health and environmental risks. As of September 2011, the Office of Legacy Management had inherited records and information for 88 sites, including records for the Yucca Mountain Project site in Nevada and for 87 long-term surveillance and maintenance sites across the United States and Puerto Rico.

What does the volume of records and information look like for former DOE Cold War sites? With some records more than 50 years old, and with records always being added through site closure, environmental cleanup, and beyond, the volume is significant. DOE Office of Legacy Management records and information holdings for 88 sites translates into more than 110,000 cubic feet of physical records and 100 terabytes of electronic information. To put this into perspective, 110,000 cubic feet of records would fill 22,000 4-drawer file cabinets, and 100 terabytes of electronic data is equivalent to 20,500 movie DVD's.

Records and information volumes will continue to increase as additional DOE sites are transferred after site closure and environmental remediation activities are complete. The Office of Legacy Management is expected to manage records for 145 sites by the year 2050.

RECORDS STORAGE

Federally mandated records retention schedules can exceed 75 years, and some records might require permanent retention. Certain records need to be kept past their retention expiration date to support litigation and ongoing technical and administrative needs. The Office of Legacy Management successfully manages and preserves records through proper storage with environmental controls and efficient indexing that provides easy access to information.

Timely retrieval of information is at the forefront of how the Office of Legacy Management does business. The need for accessibility of records and information creates a high priority on efficient records management operations. The Office of Legacy Management has taken a leading role within DOE by constructing a records storage facility to consolidate the majority of the organization's record holdings. In December 2009, the Office of Legacy Management Business Center was opened in Morgantown, West Virginia, serving as a records storage warehouse and an information technology data center.



Figure 2. DOE Office of Legacy Management Business Center, Morgantown, West Virginia.

The Business Center has earned Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification at the Gold Level for Commercial Interiors and Core and Shell. LEED is a rating system that is a nationally recognized benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of green buildings. The Business Center features natural daylight filtering into the inner offices through a clerestory, use of low-emitting materials, controllability of lighting systems, enhanced indoor air quality management, optimization of energy performance, use of regional materials, and sustainable landscape design.

The Business Center records storage warehouse is environmentally controlled to optimize records preservation. It can store approximately 150,000 cubic feet of physical records and includes a cold storage vault for microfilm, negatives, photographs, x-rays, and other media requiring more specific environmental controls. The Business Center records storage warehouse is certified by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) as an official repository for the storage for federal records. NARA is the federal agency responsible for federal record management regulations, record retention schedules, and overall guidance to federal agencies on management of federal records. NARA inspected the Office of Legacy Management records program and records storage facility in September 2011. The Office of Legacy Management records management policies and procedures were found to be consistent with NARA guidance and regulations and the Business Center fully met facility standards for records as outlined in 36 *Code of Federal Regulations* 1234. The organization was commended by NARA for dedication and professionalism in the management of records.

In 2010, the Office of Legacy Management worked with NARA to transfer records holdings from Federal Records Centers in California, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, and Ohio to the Business Center. This was a major effort in scheduling and receiving records shipments, recording incoming records, and shelving the records in the records warehouse.



Figure 3. Records receipt and processing at the Business Center.



Figure 4. Records storage at the Business Center.

RECORDS RETRIEVAL

Records management personnel are able to efficiently retrieve information at the Business Center because the majority of the records are consolidated at one location. The Office of Legacy Management uses an electronic recordkeeping system that is certified by the U.S. Department of Defense as a system that meets stringent recordkeeping requirements. The system contains information on all record holdings including records at the Business Center, active records at various office locations around the country, and record holdings maintained by the NARA Federal Records Centers. Use of the electronic recordkeeping system provides easy access to the location information for physical records and immediate access to electronic records.

A strong records management program provides efficient responses to internal and external customer requests for records. During the last five years, LM has responded to more than 8,500 records requests from both internal and external stakeholders. Office of Legacy Management records collections are accessed to respond to Freedom of Information Act requests, Privacy Act requests, Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act claims, congressional inquiries, litigation requests, and other records requests.

The Office of Legacy Management is constantly improving its procedures and processes to support record retrievals. These procedures and processes help the organization to meet stakeholder needs for records by promoting timely information retrieval.

RECORDS CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The management of older records brings has its own set of challenges. Records capture and indexing processes for records created decades ago sometimes are not as rigorous as today's processes. A lesson learned in the effective management of records is to capture a record in a recordkeeping system as soon as possible after the record is created or received. This step is

part of with the creation phase of the records life cycle in Figure 1. Entering records descriptions or electronic images of records into an automated system as soon as possible promotes efficient retrieval, which can save an organization both time and money and avoid the stress of not being able to locate records.

A second lesson learned is that records descriptions and indexes need to be meaningful. Whether records are being entered individually into a recordkeeping system or captured as a set of records in multiple boxes to be stored, the information that describes the record material is critical in aiding records identification when retrieval is required. Many older records collections do not have adequate record descriptions, which sometimes forces the Office of Legacy Management to retrieve a large volume of boxes to perform records searches.

Effective records management also includes records preservation. Proper environmental controls for various record types are required to ensure that a record remains readable for the life of the record. Preservation responsibilities may require that an organization convert aged and fragile records to more stable media. Advances in technology have made electronic record images more common and a good option to ensure records are preserved for their lifetime.

Just as important as records preservation is records destruction, which is identified at the end of the records life cycle in Figure 1. When records have met their required retention and there is no longer a need for the records, the records should follow a destruction process. Reviews and approvals from organizational subject matter experts may be required to ensure the records no longer have enduring value. Once approvals have been obtained, records destruction can be completed by the organization or contracted to a records destruction company. The Office of Legacy Management uses a combination of recycling and shredding vendors for records destruction and requires signed records destruction certification from the vendors. It is important for organizations to clean out their record holdings and destroy records when no longer needed because records take up valuable office space on shelves and in filing cabinets, which drives up storage costs. Retaining expired records also puts an organization at risk for prolonged retention if litigation holds arise and legal discovery requests are received. An organization could be required to search through old information, which costs additional time and money, because the organization failed to clean out their records when they expired.

As records from Cold War sites have been transferred to the Office of Legacy Management, the organization has mobilized transition teams to coordinate all aspects of a site transfer with records and information technology representatives participating on the transition teams. This has proved to be invaluable in successfully transferring records and data. Most sites have unique recordkeeping systems and unique records. Custodial transfer requires that there is an understanding of the record types to be inherited and how to access the record information. In several site transfers, the Office of Legacy Management transferred electronic records finding aids and consolidated the information into the organization's electronic recordkeeping system. This was an effective means of capturing important records information to assist the Office of Legacy Management with records custodial responsibilities.

The Office of Legacy Management has found it beneficial to retain records management employees who had worked at the Cold War sites. The knowledge from personnel who understand the records collections has provided the organization with valuable records expertise. These employees have also been able to train new personnel.

The Office of Legacy Management has several records projects underway to improve records management processes. Projects include re-indexing of legacy records to better understand

inherited records collections, conversion of records on fragile and aged media to more stable media, and converting frequently accessed hard copy records to digital images to facilitate speedier and more efficient records retrievals. The organization has recently updated its electronic recordkeeping system to ensure that its records software stays up to date.

SUMMARY

Managing records for long-term preservation is an important responsibility. Adequate and dedicated resources and management support are required to perform this responsibility successfully. Records tell the story of an organization and may be required to defend an organization in court, provide historical information, identify lessons learned, or provide valuable information for researchers. Loss of records or the inability to retrieve records because of poor records management processes can have serious consequences and even lead to an organization's downfall. Organizations must invest time and resources to establish a good records management program because of its significance to the organization as a whole.

The Office of Legacy Management will continue to research and apply innovative ways of doing business to ensure that the organization stays at the forefront of effective records and information management. DOE is committed to preserving records that document our nation's Cold War legacy, and the Office of Legacy Management will keep records management as a high priority.