



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

February 3, 2022

Freedom of Information Act Request

Melanie Ruiz
U.S. Geological Survey
P.O. Box 262
State College, PA 16804
foia@usgs.gov

Re: Records Relating to Research into Coronaviruses

Dear FOIA Officer,

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, *as amended* (FOIA), from the Protect the Public's Trust (PPT), which is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to promoting ethics in government and restoring the public's trust in government officials.

Records Requested

PPT requests the following five types of records held by the USGS National Wildlife Health Center:

1. From January 1, 2016 through the date the search begins, all records containing the following terms:
 - “Challenge study” or “challenge studies”;
 - “EcoHealth Alliance” or “EchoHealth”;
 - “EHA”;
 - “Peter Daszak” or “Daszak”;
 - “Chimeric virus”;
 - “SARSr-CoV spillover”;
 - “High spillover risk SARSr-Cov” or “High spillover risk SARSr-CoVs”;
 - “Gain-of-function” or “gain of function”;
 - “Wuhan Institute of Virology”;
 - “Shi Zheng-li”;
 - “Zhengli Shi”
 - “Project defuse”;
 - “Bat-borne coronaviruses”;
 - “WIV1”;



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- “SHC014”;
 - “zoonotic pathway”; and
 - “Bat-SARSr-CoV backbone” or “Bat-SARSr-CoV backbones”.
2. From January 1, 2014 through the date the search begins, any and all records of funding proposals, requests for grants, grants, contracts, authorizations for expenditures, or other similar instrument seeking or providing funding or other resources, including personnel, to EcoHealth Alliance or any project in which EcoHealth Alliance or Mr. Peter Daszak is a known participant (*i.e.*, as a partner, subcontractor, consultant, or other similar relationship).
 3. All records referring to, discussing, or otherwise referencing a letter from Jenny Powers or the National Park Service to Jonathan Sleeman or the USGS sent on or around May 21, 2020.
 4. From January 1, 2016 through the date the search begins, any and all final reports of studies involving Big Brown Bats.
 5. From January 1, 2016 through the date the search begins, copies of all signed authorizations for expenditure of appropriated funds.
 6. From August 18, 2021 through the date the search begins, all records relating to the FOIA request designated Tracking # DOI-USGS-2021-005741, including, but not limited to the applicable search terms used for the aforementioned request, whose records were searched, and any self-certifications indicating that there were no responsive records.

An adequate search in response to this request should include, but not be limited to records held by the following individuals:

- Anne Kinsinger;
- Jonathan Sleeman;
- Collette Charbonneau;
- Guelaquettza Vasquez-Meves;
- William Werkheiser;
- Barbara Wainman; and
- Tonie Roche.

For purposes of this request, we are not seeking records that consist solely of news articles or other publicly available documents not created by the U.S. government, such as mass-distribution emails from news media.

For this request, the term “all records” refers to, but is not limited to, any and all documents, correspondence, emails, text messages, letters, notes, telephone records, telephone notes, minutes, memoranda, comments, files, presentations, consultations, schedules, telephone logs, digital logs such as those produced by Microsoft Teams,



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papers published, and/or unpublished, reports, and/or all other responsive records, in draft or final form.

This request is not meant to exclude any other request that, although not specifically requested, are reasonably related to the subject matter of this request. If you or your office have destroyed or determine to withhold any records that could be reasonably construed to be responsive to this request, I ask that you indicate this fact and the reasons therefore in your response.

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies are prohibited from denying requests for information under the FOIA unless the agency reasonably believes release of the information will harm an interest that is protected by the exemption. FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 (Public Law No. 114-185), codified at 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(8)(A).

Should you decide to invoke a FOIA exemption, please include sufficient information for us to assess the basis for the exemption, including any interest(s) that would be harmed by release. Please include a detailed ledger which includes:

1. Basic factual material about each withheld record, including the originator, date, length, general subject matter, and location of each item; and
2. Complete explanations and justifications for the withholding, including the specific exemption(s) under which the record (or portion thereof) was withheld and a full explanation of how each exemption applies to the withheld material. Such statements will be helpful in deciding whether to appeal an adverse determination. Your written justification may help to avoid litigation.

If you determine that portions of the records requested are exempt from disclosure, we request that you segregate the exempt portions and mail the non-exempt portions of such records to my attention at the address below within the statutory time limit. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b).

PPT is willing to receive records on a rolling basis.

Format of Requested Records

Under FOIA, you are obligated to provide records in a readily accessible electronic format and in the format requested. See, e.g., 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B) (“In making any record available to a person under this paragraph, an agency shall provide the record in any form or format requested by the person if the record is readily reproducible by the agency in that form or format.”). “Readily accessible” means text-searchable and OCR-formatted. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B). We ask that you please provide all records in an electronic format. Additionally, please provide the records either in (1) load-ready format



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with a CSV file index or Excel spreadsheet, or; (2) for files that are in .PDF format, without any “portfolios” or “embedded files.” Portfolios and embedded files within files are not readily accessible. Please do not provide the records in a single, or “batched,” .PDF file. We appreciate the inclusion of an index.

If you should seek to withhold or redact any responsive records, we request that you: (1) identify each such record with specificity (including date, author, recipient, and parties copied); (2) explain in full the basis for withholding responsive material; and (3) provide all segregable portions of the records for which you claim a specific exemption. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b). Please correlate any redactions with specific exemptions under FOIA.

Fee Waiver Request

FOIA was designed to provide citizens a broad right to access government records. FOIA’s basic purpose is to “open agency action to the light of public scrutiny,” with a focus on the public’s “right to be informed about what their government is up to.” *U.S. Dep’t of Justice v. Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 773-74 (1989) (internal quotation and citations omitted). In order to provide public access to this information, FOIA’s fee waiver provision requires that “[d]ocuments shall be furnished without any charge or at a [reduced] charge,” if the request satisfies the standard. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii). FOIA’s fee waiver requirement is “liberally construed.” *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Rossotti*, 326 F.3d 1309, 1310 (D.C. Cir. 2003); *Forest Guardians v. U.S. Dept. of Interior*, 416 F.3d 1173, 1178 (10th Cir. 2005).

The 1986 fee waiver amendments were designed specifically to provide nonpartisan organizations such as PPT access to government records without the payment of fees. Indeed, FOIA’s fee waiver provision was intended “to prevent government agencies from using high fees to discourage certain types of requesters and requests,” which are “consistently associated with requests from journalists, scholars, and non-profit public interest groups.” *Ettlinger v. FBI*, 596 F.Supp. 867, 872 (D. Mass. 1984) (emphasis added). As one Senator stated, “[a]gencies should not be allowed to use fees as an offensive weapon against requesters seeking access to Government information” 132 Cong. Rec. S. 14298 (statement of Senator Leahy).

I. PPT Qualifies for a Fee Waiver.

Under FOIA, a party is entitled to a fee waiver when “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 [Federal] government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii). The Interior FOIA regulations at 43 C.F.R. § 2.48(a)(1)-(4) establish the same standard.

Thus, USGS must consider four factors to determine whether a request is in the public interest: (1) whether the subject of the requested records concerns “the operations or



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activities of the Federal government,” (2) whether the disclosure is “likely to contribute” to an understanding of government operations or activities, (3) whether the disclosure “will contribute to public understanding” of a reasonably broad audience of persons interested in the subject, and (4) whether the disclosure is likely to contribute “significantly” to public understanding of government operations or activities. 43 C.F.R. § 2.48(a)(1)-(4). As shown below, PPT meets each of these factors.

A. The Subject of This Request Concerns “The Operations and Activities of the Government.”

The subject matter of this request concerns the operations and activities of USGS, a federal agency. This request asks for information to understand how the USGS has expended taxpayer resources and whether it directed any such resources to persons, organizations, institutions, and topics that have been the subject of questions relating to the origins of SARs-COV-2, including controversial forms of research (*i.e.*, gain of function research), as well as information about how has processed requests for information relating to these subjects.

B. Disclosure is “Likely to Contribute” to an Understanding of Government Operations or Activities.

The requested records are meaningfully informative about government operations or activities and will contribute to an increased understanding of those operations and activities by the public.

Disclosure of the requested records will allow PPT to convey to the public information about whether officials at USGS are acting consistently with all of the applicable laws, rules, and regulations. It will also contribute to an understanding of whether and how the USGS has provided funding to groups, persons, institutions, and lines of research that have been closely tied to debates and controversies surrounding the origin of SARs-COV-2. After disclosing the requesting records, PPT will inform the public about their findings in order to ensure decisions are being made consistent with the law. Once the information is made available, PPT will analyze it and present it to its followers and the general public in a manner that will meaningfully enhance the public’s understanding of this topic.

Thus, the requested records are likely to contribute to an understanding of USGS operations and activities.



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C. Disclosure of the Requested Records Will Contribute to a Reasonably Broad Audience of Interested Persons' Understanding of the Department's Deployment of Taxpayer Resources for Scientific Activity that May Have Contributed to a Global Pandemic.

The requested records will contribute to public understanding of the officials charged with managing America's public lands and natural resources. As explained above, the records will contribute to public understanding of this topic.

It is important to understand how the Department has expended taxpayer resources and whether it directed any such resources to people, organizations, institutions, and lines of inquiry that have been associated with questions concerning the origin of SARs-COV-2, including questions about types of research such as gain of function research. PPT will use the information it obtains from the disclosed records to educate the public at large about whether public funds were directed appropriately. *See W. Watersheds Proj. v. Brown*, 318 F.Supp.2d 1036, 1040 (D. Idaho 2004) (“... find[ing] that WWP adequately specified the public interest to be served, that is, educating the public about the ecological conditions of the land managed by the BLM and also how ... management strategies employed by the BLM may adversely affect the environment.”).

Through PPT's synthesis and dissemination (by means discussed in Section II, below), disclosure of information contained and gleaned from the requested records will contribute to a broad audience of persons who are interested in the subject matter. *Ettlinger v. FBI*, 596 F.Supp. at 876 (benefit to a population group of some size distinct from the requester alone is sufficient); *Carney v. Dep't of Justice*, 19 F.3d 807, 815 (2d Cir. 1994), cert. denied, 513 U.S. 823 (1994) (applying “public” to require a sufficient “breadth of benefit” beyond the requester's own interests); *Cnty. Legal Servs. v. Dep't of Hous. & Urban Dev.*, 405 F.Supp.2d 553, 557 (E.D. Pa. 2005) (in granting fee waiver to community legal group, court noted that while the requester's “work by its nature is unlikely to reach a very general audience,” “there is a segment of the public that is interested in its work”).

Indeed, the public does not currently have an ability to easily evaluate the requested records, which concern how the Department has expended taxpayer resources. Disclosure of these records is not only “likely to contribute,” but is certain to contribute, to public understanding of how the agency is deploying taxpayer resources to further scientific research in a beneficial and ethical manner. The public is always well served when it knows how the government conducts its activities, particularly matters touching on ethics and potential misconduct questions. Hence, there can be no dispute that disclosure of the requested records to the public will educate the public about whether the agency is properly performing its duties.



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D. Disclosure is Likely to Contribute Significantly to Public Understanding of Government Operations or Activities.

PPT is not requesting these records merely for their intrinsic informational value. Disclosure of the requested records will significantly enhance the public's understanding of the agency's use of government resources. The records are also certain to shed light on USGS's compliance with its own mission and responsibility to protect our nation's natural resources and cultural heritage. Such public oversight of agency action is vital to our democratic system and clearly envisioned by the drafters of the FOIA. Thus, PPT meets this factor as well.

II. PPT has the Ability to Disseminate the Requested Information Broadly.

PPT is a group that informs, educates, and counsels the public about the importance of government officials acting consistently with their legal and ethics obligations. A key component of being able to fulfill this mission and educate the public about these duties is access to information that articulates what obligations exist for senior government officials. PPT intends to publish information from requested records on its website, distribute the records and expert analysis to its followers through social media channels including Twitter, Facebook, and other similar platforms. PPT also has a robust network of reporters, bloggers, and media publications interested in its content and that have durable relationships with the organization. PPT intends to use any or all of these far-reaching media outlets to share with the public information obtained as a result of this request.

Through these means, PPT will ensure: (1) that the information requested contributes significantly to the public's understanding of the government's operations or activities; (2) that the information enhances the public's understanding to a greater degree than currently exists; (3) that PPT possesses the expertise to explain the requested information to the public; (4) that PPT possesses the ability to disseminate the requested information to the general public; (5) and that the news media recognizes PPT as a reliable source in the field of government ethics and conduct.

Public oversight and enhanced understanding of Interior's duties is absolutely necessary. In determining whether disclosure of requested information will contribute significantly to public understanding, a guiding test is whether the requester will disseminate the information to a reasonably broad audience of persons interested in the subject. *Carney v U.S. Dept. of Justice*, 19 F.3d 807 (2nd Cir. 1994). PPT need not show how it intends to distribute the information, because "[n]othing in FOIA, the [agency] regulation, or our case law require[s] such pointless specificity." *Judicial Watch*, 326 F.3d at 1314. It is sufficient for PPT to show how it distributes information to the public generally. *Id.*



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III. Obtaining the Requested Records is of No Commercial Interest to PPT.

Access to government records, disclosure forms, and similar materials through FOIA requests is essential to PPT's role of educating the general public. PPT is a nonpartisan organization with supporters and members of the public who seek a transparent, ethical and impartial government that makes decisions in the best interests of all Americans. PPT has no commercial interest and will realize no commercial benefit from the release of the requested records.

IV. Conclusion

For all of the foregoing reasons, PPT qualifies for a full fee waiver. We hope that the Department will immediately grant this fee waiver request and begin to search and disclose the requested records without any unnecessary delays.

If you have any questions, please contact me at foia@protectpublictrust.org. All records and any related correspondence should be sent to my attention at the address below.

Sincerely,

Morgan Yardis
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