

# Drilling For Federal Information on The Internet



**By Eric Sinrod,**

In prior articles, I have explained that the public can gain access to federal information by submitting requests to government agencies and departments under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In theory at least, requested information will be provided unless an agency or department invokes an exemption justifying withholding of the information.

Often times, FOIA requesters have to wait weeks, months, and even longer to receive information from the government pursuant to their requests. Fortunately, some agencies and departments have evolved to the point that they now are posting routinely requested and non-controversial information on their government Web sites.

Nevertheless, vast amounts of federal information is not posted to these government Web sites. And compounding this problem are reports that such federal information currently cannot be made available via search engines.

Indeed, according to the Washington Post, the federal government has been unwilling or unable to make millions of its Web pages accessible to search engines such as those of Google, Yahoo and Microsoft. Apparently, these pages are "invisible" to search engines because they are maintained in such a way that Web "crawlers" used by search engines cannot find and index the pages.

Another reported impediment is that many government Web sites require the completion of online forms before access to the sites can be gained, and this creates a roadblock for search engine crawlers.

The good news is that Microsoft has been working with a number of federal agencies to make their Web sites crawler-friendly and Google has been teaming with government entities like the Smithsonian and the National Archives to provide for greater search access.

Of course, making federal records more available to search engines will require manpower and time. In addition, care must be taken to ensure that information that should not be made publicly

available (such as information relating to national security issues and ongoing law enforcement investigations), must be protected from disclosure, which adds to the burden.

Nevertheless, to the extent the public can gain access to federal information by way of routine searches through search engines like Google, the government over time should see its FOIA workload decrease.

*Eric Sinrod is a partner in the San Francisco office of Duane Morris LLP (<http://www.duanemorris.com>) where he focuses on litigation matters of various types, including information technology and intellectual property disputes. His Web site is <http://www.sinrodlaw.com> and he can be reached at [ejsinrod@duanemorris.com](mailto:ejsinrod@duanemorris.com). To receive a weekly email link to Mr. Sinrod's columns, please send an email to him with Subscribe in the Subject line.*

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