



Community-
Led FOIA:
A Practice



Environmental Data
& Governance Initiative

What is FOIA?

FOIA (Freedom of Information Act):

FOIA stands for the Freedom of Information Act. FOIA laws allow people to access publicly held records and require government information to adhere to record retention laws. People have the right to know. Some examples of public records include government emails from one agency to the next, a budget approved by a city official, death records, surveillance of a government building, the algorithm that runs the Calscreen environmental mapping project, audio from a city hall meeting, and many more.

Background:

In 1955, California Democratic Congressman John Moss championed government transparency, following a trend during the Cold War that normalized bureaucratic secrecy. The bill Moss proposed met opposition from federal agencies and politicians alike. After significant clarifications (and debates), the House passed the bill with a 307 - 0 vote. President Lyndon B. Johnson reluctantly signed the bill into law on July 4th, 1966. See more here (5 U.S. Code § 552).

FOIA practices became more affordable following the Nixon Watergate issues. In 1974, Congress revised the law to include sanctions, timeframes, and language to waive fees for journalists, public interest groups, and concerned people. FOIA availability varies based on Federal or State regulations. Federal records tend to be more open, and States can define what is in the public record individually or state-by-state.


Why FOIA?

Public information should be open and accessible. The United States has a representative democracy, where our tax dollars pay for the government. The government represents and operates in the interest of the people—citizens and non-citizens alike. It is our right to see how the government operates, and the public retains a tremendous amount of information.

Through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, we can piece together critical information about how our government functions, specific actions taken, and decisions made. For example, we can learn how laws and policies are and are not implemented or enforced, about communications between agencies, governmental personnel, and industry representatives, and how scientific findings or questions were or were not included in policy development.

While an abundance of information is technically available to the public through FOIA requests, that information can, in practice, be relatively inaccessible. It is important to note that many types of records are private, namely, records that are considered deliberative or are old enough that they are no longer retained, so creating productive FOIA requests often requires some amount of information triangulation. Writing effective FOIAs can take patience, persistence, and learning specific tactics. One of the most essential functions of someone who engages with FOIA is to make these inaccessible records more accessible to other members of your communities. Public records should be truly public.

Through FOIA and other government transparency laws, often called “Sunshine” laws, civil organizations and journalists have shed light on places where our institutions are not functioning as designed and where critical design flaws exist. FOIA facilitates our advocacy for effective and just governance.



FOIA: A Case Study

Critical community questions supporting advocacy strategies and goals can be answered through records received through FOIA requests.

Here we present one recent example of Community-Led FOIA producing useful information for advocacy.

Example:

Cold War-era military installations and military bases on Sivuqaq (also known as the colonial name of St Lawrence Island) contaminated the land and water. Throughout the 2000s, the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) oversaw the remediation of these Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS). Members of the community and community advocates argued that the remediation activities did not clean up the sites enough for them to utilize these lands and waters as they had before the military presence.

Subsequently, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) debated putting these sites on the National Priorities List (NPL), the list of the US' most contaminated sites, which leverages EPA Superfund funds to remediate. The EPA declined to place the Sivuqaq FUDS on the NPL, and in 2013, the USACE's cleanup of the sites officially concluded.

Members of the communities attest that the land and water are not clean. They continue to advocate for a more thorough and just remediation of the sites. The organization, Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT), has led this advocacy campaign throughout its history. ACAT wanted to understand why the EPA excluded Sivuqaq sites from the NPL.



To support ACAT's advocacy and find out why the EPA declined to place the Sivuuq FUDS on the NPL, EDGI filed the following FOIA request in 2023 to the EPA's Region 10 office (which includes Alaska).

Hello, I am researching the federal response to environmental contamination at Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS). I am requesting information about EPA's involvement, including actions and evaluations, at three FUDS on St Lawrence Island: The Northeast Cape (including Site 7 Cargo Road Beach) and Gambell. These are project numbers F10AK096903, F10AK096905, and F10AK0696. The records I am requesting are:

- Notes, correspondences, and reports regarding the decision not to list these sites on the National Priorities List.
- Notes, correspondences, testing results, and reports from any evaluative work conducted, including review of the USACE's decision documents.
- Materials developed for public engagement and education related to these three sites
- Notes and reports from any public engagement or feedback received.

Thank you for your time, EDGI Member

EDGI received 20 records from 1985-2002 in response to this above request. These included memos from the EPA to leaders of Savoonga and Gambell, the Yupik communities near the FUDS sites. The EPA responded that it decided not to place these sites on the NPL and provided the rationale for that decision in 2002 memos from the EPA Region 10 Administrator to the leaders of Savoonga and Gambell. Notably, the EPA explained that the Department of Defense (DOD), through the USACE, was proceeding in a manner "consistent" with how the EPA would approach these hazardous waste sites. Even if the sites were placed on the NPL, the EPA would not be able to provide additional funding and the DOD would continue to be responsible for cleanup of the sites.



At the same time that EDGI had filed the request regarding the EPA's NPL decision, EDGI also filed a companion FOIA request to USACE regarding the remediation Feasibility Study for the FUDS at Gambell, which dictated the final remediation plans and actions for those sites.

The request read:

I request that a copy of the following documents containing the following information be provided to me: Army Corps of Engineers Feasibility Study (FS) from 2004 supporting documents and records for the Gambell site on St. Lawrence Island. Additionally, any public meeting notes or documents to discuss the plan in Gambell on July 21, 2004. We also request any compliance testing or follow-up testing and site visits since the remediation work was completed.

Through this FOIA request, EDGI obtained 49 documents from 1992-2013. Several of these documents pointed to consistent advocacy by ACAT and the community-led Restoration Advisory Board for the FUDS to improve the remediation plans. Ultimately, the EPA evaluated USACE's remediation plans and actions, and in 2013, the EPA sent a memo to the USACE with the conclusions of its evaluation. The EPA stated that, while EPA may have done some things differently, the overall remediation activities conducted by the USACE were not substantially different from what would have been done if EPA had conducted them. However, the EPA stressed that for the sites where the USACE had left contaminants above target cleanup levels, the USACE needed to conduct site visits and long-term monitoring to protect human health.

While the EPA's 2002 decision and 2013 evaluation are frustrating and do not bring the Sivuqaq communities closer to complete remediation and restoration of their land and water, these records reveal the reasons for EPA's decisions and (in)actions at these sites. ACAT can leverage this information in its ongoing advocacy.





What is community-led FOIA?

Community-led FOIA is a process led by people within communities who are primarily knowledgeable about and accountable to their communities. Community members (or their representatives) ask questions, and those questions are directed (by community members or their advocates) to the proper government agencies to get answers. Community-led processes reflect and represent the lived experiences, values, perspectives, and voices of community constituencies. The method aims for transparency and full accountability to communities. Community-led research is self-determining, not influenced by government, industry, or donors.

Obtaining community-led FOIA information is one step. The follow-up should include full transparency, education, and information sharing, advocacy, and monitoring of policies.

How to do environmental community-led FOIA

The process of filing federal FOIA requests and various states' public records requests can vary widely, as can the availability of different kinds of records. Here we detail the process for composing and filing effective records requests.



Federal Agency FOIA Requests

Most federal agencies can receive FOIA requests through at least one of the following methods:

1. online through a central portal – [foia.gov](https://www.foia.gov),
2. online through their own FOIA website,
3. or by emailing the agency FOIA desk.

While [foia.gov](https://www.foia.gov) is convenient, we do not recommend it because [foia.gov](https://www.foia.gov) does not automatically provide the requester with a FOIA tracking number or any confirmation of receipt of your request, and in our experience, FOIA requests can occasionally be lost in this process. When agencies receive FOIA requests through their own agency portals, they often automatically issue a copy of your request and a FOIA number that can be used to track down your request if it has not been responded to appropriately. When submitting FOIA requests through email, you do not typically automatically receive a FOIA number, but you do have your own record of submission date and content, which is useful to have in the event the agency doesn't respond in a timely fashion.

Below are the FOIA websites and portals of some agencies that may be of interest, as well as the email addresses of the agency's FOIA liaison. If you have significant concerns about an agency's response to your request (e.g., delay, expected timeline of response, redactions, etc.), you can raise those concerns to the agency FOIA liaison. You may also raise them to the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS), which can support communication between you as the requester and the agency.

Agency FOIA request page resources:

EPA: foiapublicaccessportal.epa.gov

Army Corps of Engineers: usace.army.mil/FOIA/Offices

Air Force: efoia.cce.af.mil/app/Home.aspx

Navy: secnav.navy.mil/foia/Pages/default.aspx

Bureau of Land Management: foiaexpresspal.doi.gov/app/Home.aspx

US Coast Guard: securerelease.us/

Agency FOIA liaisons

EPA: hq.foia@epa.gov

Army Corp of Engineers: foia-liaison@usace.army.mil

Air Force: DAF.FOIA@us.af.mil

Navy: DONFOIAPublicLiaison@navy.mil

Bureau of Land Management: rwitt@blm.gov,
[blm.gov/about/foia/foia-contacts](https://www.blm.gov/about/foia/foia-contacts)

US Coast Guard: EFOIA@uscg.gov

OGIS: ogis@nara.gov

Here are our recommendations for writing an effective FOIA request:

1. The most important thing is to be specific about what you are seeking. Do as much research on the matter as you can through other available means (e.g. Google searching) in order to provide clear requests to agencies. Agency FOIA officers are career staff, and the more precise you can make the request, the better they'll be able to provide you with the relevant documents. Specificity will also help you get the records of interest without FOIA officers sending you a litany of documents that are useless to you or charging you thousands of dollars for the staff time to fulfill the request.
2. In your request, be sure to include the subject matter of interest (e.g., records pertaining to a given contaminated site or event), the types of records desired (e.g., email correspondence, site visit notes, and reports, etc.), and the date range of interest.
3. It can often be helpful to provide some context about why you're looking for these records, though that is not required.