

WAC 44-14-05002 "Reasonably locatable" and "reasonably translatable" electronic records. (1) **"Reasonably locatable" electronic records.** The act obligates an agency to provide nonexempt "identifiable ... records." RCW 42.56.080. An "identifiable record" is essentially one that agency staff can "reasonably locate." WAC 44-14-04002(2). Therefore, a general summary of the "identifiable record" standard as it relates to electronically locating public records is that the act requires an agency to provide a nonexempt "reasonably locatable" record. This does not mean that an agency can decide if a request is "reasonable" and only fulfill those requests. Rather, "reasonably locatable" is a concept, grounded in the act, for analyzing electronic records issues.

In general, a "reasonably locatable" electronic record is one which can be located with typical search features and organizing methods contained in the agency's current software. For example, a retained email containing the term "XYZ" is usually reasonably locatable by using the email program search feature. However, some email search features have limitations, such as not searching attachments, but are a good starting point for the search. Information might be "reasonably locatable" by methods other than a search feature. For example, a request for a copy of all retained emails sent by a specific agency employee for a particular date is "reasonably locatable" because it can be found utilizing a common organizing feature of the agency's email program, such as a chronological "sent" folder. Another indicator of what is "reasonably locatable" is whether the agency keeps the information in a particular way for its business purposes. For example, an agency might keep a database of permit holders including the name of the business. The agency does not separate the businesses by whether they are publicly traded corporations or not because it has no reason to do so. A request for the names of the businesses which are publicly traded is not "reasonably locatable" because the agency has no business purpose for keeping the information that way. In such a case, the agency should provide the names of the businesses (assuming they are not exempt from disclosure) and the requestor can analyze the database to determine which businesses are publicly traded corporations.

(2) **"Reasonably translatable" electronic records.** The act requires an agency to provide a "copy" of nonexempt records (subject to certain copying charges). RCW 42.56.070(1) and 42.56.080. To provide a photocopy of a paper record, an agency must take some reasonable steps to mechanically translate the agency's original document into a useable copy for the requestor such as copying it in a copying machine, or scanning it into Adobe Acrobat PDF®. Similarly, an agency must take some reasonable steps to prepare an electronic copy of an electronic record or a paper record. Providing an electronic copy is analogous to providing a paper record: An agency must take steps to translate the agency's original into a useable copy for the requestor, if it is reasonable and feasible for it to do so.

The "reasonably translatable" concept typically operates in three kinds of situations:

- (a) An agency has only a paper record;
- (b) An agency has an electronic record in a generally commercially available format (such as a Windows® product); or
- (c) An agency has an electronic record in an electronic format but the requestor seeks a copy in a different electronic format.

The following examples assume no redactions are necessary.

(i) **Agency has paper-only records.** When an agency only has a paper copy of a record, an example of a "reasonably translatable" copy

would be scanning the record into an Adobe Acrobat PDF® file and providing it to the requestor. The agency could recover its actual or statutory cost for scanning. See RCW 42.56.120. While not required, providing a PDF copy of the record is analogous to making a paper copy. However, if the agency lacked a scanner (such as a small unit of local government), the record would not be "reasonably translatable" with the agency's own resources. In such a case, the agency could provide a paper copy to the requestor.

(ii) **Agency has electronic records in a generally commercially available format.** When an agency has an electronic record in a generally commercially available format, such as an Excel® spreadsheet, and the requestor requests an electronic copy in that format, no translation into another format is necessary; the agency should provide the spreadsheet electronically. Another example is where an agency has an electronic record in a generally commercially available format (such as Word®) and the requestor requests an electronic copy in Word®. An agency cannot instead provide a WordPerfect® copy because there is no need to translate the electronic record into a different format. In the paper-record context, this would be analogous to the agency intentionally making an unreadable photocopy when it could make a legible one. Similarly, the WordPerfect® "translation" by the agency is an attempt to hinder access to the record. In this example, the agency should provide the document in Word® format. Electronic records in generally commercially available formats such as Word® could be easily altered by the requestor. Requestors should note that altering public records and then intentionally passing them off as exact copies of public records might violate various criminal and civil laws.

(iii) **Agency has electronic records in an electronic format other than the format requested.** When an agency has an electronic record in an electronic format (such as a Word® document) but the requestor seeks a copy in another format (such as WordPerfect®), the question is whether the agency's document is "reasonably translatable" into the requested format. If the format of the agency document allows it to "save as" another format without changing the substantive accuracy of the document, and the agency has a WordPerfect® license, this would be "reasonably translatable." The agency's record might not translate perfectly, but it was the requestor who requested the record in a format other than the one used by the agency. Another example is where an agency has a database in a unique format that is not generally commercially available. A requestor requests an electronic copy. The agency can convert the data in its unique system into a near-universal format such as a comma-delimited or tab-delimited format. The requestor can then convert the comma-delimited or tab-delimited data into a database program (such as Access®) and use it. The data in this example is "reasonably translatable" into a comma-delimited or tab-delimited format so the agency should do so. A final example is where an agency has an electronic record in a generally commercially available format (such as Word®) but the requestor requests a copy in an obscure word processing format. The agency offers to provide the record in Word® format but the requestor refuses. The agency can easily convert the Word® document into a standard text file which, in turn, can be converted into most programs. The Word® document is "reasonably translatable" into a text file so the agency should do so. It is up to the requestor to convert the text file into his or her preferred format, but the agency has provided access to the electronic record in the most technically feasible way and not attempted to hinder the requestor's access to it.

(3) **Agency should keep an electronic copy of the electronic records it provides.** An electronic record is usually more susceptible to manipulation and alteration than a paper record. Therefore, an agency should keep an electronic copy of the electronic records it provides to a requestor to show the exact records it provided, for the time period required in its records retention schedule. Additionally, an electronic copy might also be helpful when responding to subsequent electronic records requests for the same records.

[Statutory Authority: RCW 42.56.570. WSR 18-06-051, § 44-14-05002, filed 3/2/18, effective 4/2/18. Statutory Authority: 2005 c 483 § 4, amending RCW 42.56.570. WSR 07-13-058, § 44-14-05002, filed 6/15/07, effective 7/16/07.]