Sample Document to Illustrate Hidden Data

(This document is a sample and was created to illustrate how a document which appears "clean" on its face can contain hidden information not intended for public distribution.)

SUBJECT: Removing Hidden Data From Documents Before Publication

DISTRIBUTION: All Employees in Agency Management Office

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 12, 2006

All employees are directed to remove hidden information from any document before it is released in any electronic form. Particular attention should be paid to documents published to the Internet, such as standard Web pages (HTML, XML, etc.), pdf files, word processing files, slide presentations, and spreadsheets.

Hidden information may be present in comments, metadata, or edited information that was removed from the final document but remains as an edit trail. Metadata may include such information as:

- Author's name or initials, and names of other document authors and contributors
- Division, branch, or organization name
- Identification of your computer, network server, or other hardware you use (directly or indirectly)
- File summary information
- Non-visible portions of linked or embedded objects
- Revision history, including earlier versions
- Template information
- Hidden text or cells
- Comments

Most documents go through many edits, often by many different individuals, before they reach their final form. One person might create a first draft, while several others might see (and explain in comments) problems that could result from the wording, and propose new wording. Internal agency plans might be discussed. Comments also can disclose matters that are part of internal agency deliberations.

In fact, the more complex and important a document is, and the more people who review it, the greater the risk that information that should not be disclosed to the public will be included as hidden data. This often occurs when many people work on a document together and track changes, each one adding his or her own thoughts and comments on the work of the others, and making changes and additions to the text.

Sometimes, information that is inadvertently disclosed, such as name of the initial author, is not important, even though it does not belong in the final document. Sometimes, if a template is used, this person might not even work for the office that is issuing the

document. But at other times, information which is inadvertently disclosed can compromise important programs or mission-related goals, or inadvertently disclose proprietary or personal information, or private matters such as the disposition of claims of specific individuals or businesses.

Major government agencies and private companies have been embarrassed or suffered large financial losses because of information that was inadvertently disclosed in hidden data.

Because of the importance of removing hidden data, all office directors will be held personally responsible for any unintended disclosures in published documents.