



October 24, 2017

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

FEMA Information Management Division
FOIA Request
500 C Street SW
Mailstop 3172
Washington, DC 20472
fema-foia@fema.dhs.gov

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations for the Department of Homeland Security, 6 C.F.R. part 5, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

On October 23, 2017, the Washington Post reported that a small energy company from Montana, known as Whitefish Energy, had been awarded a \$300 million contract to help restore Puerto Rico's electrical grid in the wake of last month's Hurricane Maria.¹ Whitefish Energy is based in Whitefish, Montana, which is the hometown of Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, and indeed its CEO, Andy Techmanski, has said he knows Mr. Zinke.² Whitefish is financed by the private-equity firm HBC Investments (among other sources), which was founded by Joe Colonna, a frequent donor to the RNC and President Trump.³ Mufson et al., *supra* note 1; Hernandez Cabiya, *supra* note 2; Klippenstein, *supra* note 3; Hernandez Cabiya, *supra* note 3.

¹ See Steven Mufson et al., *Small Montana Firm Lands Puerto Rico's Biggest Contract to Get the Power Back On*, WASH. POST (Oct. 23, 2017, 9:29 PM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/small-montana-firm-lands-puerto-ricos-biggest-contract-to-get-the-power-back-on/2017/10/23/31cccc3e-b4d6-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html?utm_term=.1498104f6b82; Yanira Hernandez Cabiya, *Puerto Rico Gov't Signs 3rd MultiMillion-Dollar Contract to Reestablish Electric Grid*, CARIBBEAN BUS., Oct. 20, 2017, <http://caribbeanbusiness.com/puerto-rico-govt-signs-3rd-million-dollar-contract-to-reestablish-electric-grid/>.

² See *id.*

³ See Ken Klippenstein, *\$300M Puerto Rico Recovery Contract Awarded to Tiny Utility Company Linked to Major Trump Donor*, THE DAILY BEAST (Oct. 24, 2017, 7:29 AM), https://www.thedailybeast.com/dollar300m-puerto-rico-recovery-contract-awarded-to-tiny-utility-company-linked-to-major-trump-donor?via=twitter_page; Yanira Hernandez Cabiya, *A Look Into Whitefish Energy, Hired to Rebuild Puerto Rico's Power Grid*, CARIBBEAN BUS., Oct. 23, 2017,



American Oversight seeks to shed light on the circumstances behind the recent award of a sizable federal contract to Whitefish Energy.

Requested Records

American Oversight requests that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (“FEMA”) produce the following within twenty business days:

All communications between FEMA and any of the individuals listed in Appendix A containing any of the following search terms (whether in the body, subject, or to/from/cc/bcc fields):

- Whitefish
- HBC
- Flat Creek Capital or FCC
- Contrafo
- Colonna
- McNellie
- Techmanski
- Chiames
- Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority or PREPA
- Ramos
- Rodriguez

Please provide all responsive records from March 1, 2017, to the date the search is conducted. For the last two search terms, American Oversight is seeking records related in any way to the head of PREPA, Ricardo Luis Ramos Rodriguez, also known as Ricardo Ramos. Thus, you can exclude as non-responsive any records that return those search terms but do not refer to that individual.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If FEMA uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail

<http://caribbeanbusiness.com/a-look-into-whitefish-energy-hired-to-rebuild-puerto-ricos-power-grid/>.

messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁴ **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**⁵

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered FEMA’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**⁶ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but FEMA’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that FEMA use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

⁴ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

⁵ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁶ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”⁷ If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”⁸ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”⁹ Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”¹⁰

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹¹ Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, FEMA is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and FEMA can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

⁷ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

⁸ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

⁹ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹¹ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way.¹² Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹³

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is “in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.”¹⁴ Whitefish Energy was recently awarded a very sizable federal contract, despite having a full-time staff of only two employees at the time of Hurricane Maria.¹⁵ Whitefish was also awarded contracts earlier this year from the Department of Energy.¹⁶ There are numerous connections between Whitefish and its private-equity partner, HBC Investments, and various members of the Trump administration, including, most notably, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.¹⁷ The award of such a significant contract undoubtedly constitutes a government operation or activity, and the public has a significant interest in better understanding the process behind the award of such a sizable contract to an entity with numerous political connections to the current administration. Disclosure of the requested information will contribute to public understanding; as discussed below American Oversight has both the ability and the intention to effectively convey the information it receives to the public.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁸ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁹ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of

¹² 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(i).

¹³ 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(ii).

¹⁴ 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(i), (2)(i)-(iv).

¹⁵ See Mufson et al., *supra* note 1.

¹⁶ See Mark Hand, *Puerto Rico Electric Utility Awards \$300 Million Contract to Tiny Trump-Connected Company*, THINK PROGRESS (Oct. 24, 2017, 11:32 AM), <https://thinkprogress.org/puerto-rico-contract-raises-eyebrows-746a196e7831/>.

¹⁷ See Mufson et al., *supra* note 1; Klippenstein, *supra* note 3; Hernandez Cabiya, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸ 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(ii), (3)(i)-(ii).

¹⁹ American Oversight currently has approximately 11,500 page likes on Facebook and 35,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Oct. 23, 2017); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Oct. 23, 2017).

editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,²⁰ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.²¹ As another example, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.²²

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with you on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Sara Creighton at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.869.5246. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight

²⁰ *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

²¹ *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

²² *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, www.auditthewall.org.

Appendix A

In connection with the above FOIA request, American Oversight requests that FEMA search for communications with any of the following individuals (most of whom are with the U.S. Department of the Interior):

1. Ryan Zinke
2. Douglas “Doug” Domenech
3. David Bernhardt
4. Scott Hommel
5. Micah Chambers
6. Alan Mikeelson
7. Vincent DeVito
8. James Cason
9. Daniel Jorjani
10. Heather Swift
11. Downey Magallanes
12. Scott Cameron
13. Lori Mashburn
14. Lolita “Lola” Zinke