



## The Paperwork Reduction Act: At-a-Glance

The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) concerns much more than just paperwork: it establishes the guiding policies for the collection and dissemination of government information. The PRA created the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as well as information policy offices in the agencies. The PRA charges OIRA and the agencies with a wide range of responsibilities for information resource management. The following is a brief overview of those responsibilities.

### **Responsibilities under the Paperwork Reduction Act**

Officials within OIRA and the agencies work in conjunction to carry out the mandates of the act, including the following:

- Developing information resources management policies
- Reviewing and approving information collections
- Promoting public access to information
- Coordinating statistical policies and systems
- Implementing records management activities
- Overseeing information privacy and security policies
- Overseeing the development of major information technology systems

### **Information resources management policies**

Both OIRA and the agencies are responsible for developing and maintaining a strategic plan for information resources management. OIRA is charged with creating uniform policies across agencies and conducting pilot projects to test alternative policies for minimizing information collection burden and maximizing utility. The

#### **Important Definitions**

*Burden:* “time, effort or financial resources expended by person to generate, maintain or provide information to or for a Federal agency.”

*Information resources management:* “the process of managing resources to accomplish agency missions and to improve agency performance, including through the reduction of information collection burdens on the public.”

agency information officer must work to incorporate information resource policies into the work of the agency and must account for information resource expenditures.

### **The paperwork clearance process**

The central component of the PRA is the paperwork clearance process. Every time a federal agency proposes collecting information from ten or more people, the information collection must first be approved by OIRA. Everything from tax forms to health research questionnaires is reviewed by OIRA. Before the agency submits a proposed information collection to OIRA for approval, the proposal is first reviewed internally by an independent office charged with managing information. The agency must also announce the proposed information collection in the *Federal Register* and solicit public comments.

Only after OIRA reviews and approves an information collection and assigns an OMB control number can an agency proceed to collect information. If OIRA fails to comment on an information collection within 60 days, the information collection is automatically approved for one year. For information collection requirements associated with a rulemaking, an agency can reject OIRA’s comments on an information collection, but OIRA can still block the information collection if it believes the agency missed procedural steps or responded inappropriately to OIRA’s comments. Independent regulatory agencies can overrule an OIRA decision on an information collection.

### **Public access to government information**

OIRA and the agencies work together to ensure timely public access to government information. The PRA also establishes the electronic Government Information Locator System to assist the public in finding and retrieving government information.

### **Statistical policies and systems**

Both OIRA and the agencies are charged with ensuring the integrity of the federal government's statistical information. OIRA coordinates the effort through the development of statistical procedures, methods and classifications. The agencies are responsible for protecting the privacy of participants in statistical surveys, observing federal standards for data collection and analysis, and ensuring the timely releasing of statistical information and the underlying data.

### **Records management activities**

OIRA oversees records management activities in conjunction with the National Archivist and the Administrator of Government Services. The agency is responsible for implementing and enforcing records management procedures and policies.

### **Information privacy and security**

OIRA is charged with overseeing policies and guidelines on information security, privacy, disclosure, etc., while the agencies work to enforce these policies. OIRA and the agencies work together "to identify and afford security protections commensurate with the risk and magnitude of the harm resulting from" a breach of information security.

### **Information technology**

OIRA oversees the development and implementation of the government's information technology policies, including coordinating interagency information technology initiatives, while the agencies are responsible for implementing information technology policies and using information technology to improve program effectiveness.

### **Burden Reduction**

The PRA explicitly requires OIRA work with agency heads to make burden reductions that "represent the maximum practicable in each agency." Overall, the PRA required annual overall reductions of 10 percent in 1996 and 1997, and 5 percent annual reductions in 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001.

### **Reports to Congress**

OIRA must submit a report annually to Congress on information collection burdens on the public, including the accomplishments of agencies as well as violations of the PRA and a list of agencies that failed to reduce burden. The report also includes descriptions of the extent to which agencies have improved their use of statistical information, improved public access to information, and improved government performance through information management policies.

### **Exemptions from PRA**

The PRA does not apply to information collected:

- during a federal criminal investigation or disposition;
- during the conduct of "a civil action to which the United States or any official or agency thereof is a party [or] an administrative action or investigation involving an agency against specific individuals or entities";
- "by compulsory process pursuant to the Antitrust Civil Process Act and section 13 of the Federal Trade Commission Improvements Act of 1980"; or
- "during the conduct of intelligence activities . . . or during the conduct of cryptologic activities that are communications security activities."