

United States District Court  
Northern District of California

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UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

PUBLIC JUSTICE FOUNDATION;  
ANIMAL LEGAL DEFENSE FUND;  
CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL  
DIVERSITY; CENTER FOR FOOD  
SAFETY; FOOD & WATER WATCH,

No. C 20-01103 WHA

Plaintiffs,

v.

FARM SERVICE AGENCY,  
Defendant.

**ORDER GRANTING MOTION  
CHALLENGING DEFICIENCIES IN  
FSA’S REVISED SEARCH AND  
PRODUCTION**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this Freedom of Information Act case, plaintiff advocacy organizations challenge the adequacy of a government agency’s search with regard to one FOIA request underlying this case. To the extent stated herein, the motion is granted.

**STATEMENT**

Plaintiffs Public Justice Foundation, Animal Legal Defense Fund, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Food Safety, and Food & Water Watch are advocacy organizations committed to building a more sustainable and ethical food system. To that end, plaintiffs use information requests to monitor compliance with applicable laws, bring to public attention issues within our food system, and advocate for policy change (Compl. ¶¶ 1–2).

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Defendant Farm Service Agency, operating within the Department of Agriculture, is responsible for administering direct farm loans to eligible agricultural producers and landowners. These duties, plaintiffs contend, are subject to compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. Before providing financing for proposed agricultural operations, such as the construction of concentrated animal feeding operations, FSA should then review the proposed project, determine the potential environmental impacts, and conduct further analysis as necessary (Compl. ¶¶ 1–2).

Plaintiffs have sought to monitor FSA’s administration of the farm loan program and connected environmental review through FOIA requests. The requests have targeted agency records regarding specific agricultural operations and geographical areas. The requests have also been aimed at uncovering the true extent to which FSA considers environmental impacts before awarding federal farm loans to an applicant and the extent to which FSA oversees the use of the funds after distribution. And, at the heart of this case, plaintiffs collectively submitted a FOIA request for records relating to “FSA’s directives and/or policies for responding to and/or processing FOIA requests and appeals” (Compl. ¶¶ 1–2; Decl. Buchan ¶ 7).

Plaintiffs filed this action in February 2020 challenging FSA’s alleged pattern and practice of improperly withholding records responsive to plaintiffs’ FOIA requests. In particular, the complaint alleges a pattern and practice of withholding responsive records under FOIA Exemptions 3 and 6, demonstrated by eight FOIA requests plaintiffs submitted. The pattern-and-practice claims make up three of plaintiffs’ six claims for relief. The other half relate to plaintiffs’ collective April 2019 FOIA request regarding FSA’s FOIA practices, including alleged failures to make a proper initial determination, conduct an adequate search, and promptly release agency records.



1 FSA conducted its first search pertaining to the April 2019 FOIA request looking for records  
2 responsive to the July 25 message. Although the agency provided no information about the  
3 method or search terms used in this initial search, the results hewed to a literal reading of  
4 plaintiffs' email. "FSA identified one instance where guidance had been provided about a  
5 certain kind of request from a certain category of requesters, as described in the requester's  
6 message." In litigation pending between a class of corn producers and a corporation, farmers  
7 had given permission to their attorneys to receive certain forms the farmers had filed with FSA  
8 documenting information about their planting. Thousands of requests flooded in, creating the  
9 need for the agency to provide guidance to ensure that the requests were processed  
10 consistently. In July 2019, FSA located and produced in full two emails totaling seven pages  
11 concerning the agency's guidance and directives regarding the corn litigation. No more  
12 documents were produced prior to the commencement of this action in February 2020 (Decl.  
13 Buchan ¶¶ 13–15).

14 After the initial case management conference here, FSA conducted a supplemental  
15 search. This time, FSA's search hewed closely to the language of the original request, rather  
16 than subsequent communications the agency had with plaintiffs. As described by FSA FOIA  
17 Officer Buchan, the agency took a broad view of the FOIA request (Decl. Buchan ¶¶ 16–17):

18 FSA carefully considered how best to design an appropriate search.  
19 For this new search, the agency out of an abundance of caution took  
20 a broad view of the request to ensure that the search would capture  
21 the agency's actual directives and policies, which are available on  
agency websites, including 2-INFO, and also e-mails that were most  
likely to be responsive because they specifically addressed the  
subject of the agency's directives and policies.

22 FSA executed the search in three steps. *First*, the agency searched its online laws and  
23 regulations website, the routine repository for FSA policy and handbooks, for all FSA notices  
24 concerning FOIA processing. This search identified 265 pages of responsive records, which  
25 the agency turned over in full (Decl. Buchan ¶ 17).

26 *Second*, FSA searched its email system for any emails to or from an FSA employee with  
27 the following terms *in the subject line*: "2-Info," "App-70," "FOIA Guidance," "FOIA  
28 Policy," "FOIA Directives," "FOIA processing," "processing FOIA requests and appeals," and

1 “processing FOIA appeals.” Attempting to explain the search terms used and their targeting of  
2 the subject line, the agency states (Decl. Buchan ¶ 18):

3 Lessons learned from the agency’s past FOIA search experience had  
4 taught that it needed to use search terms such as these and target the  
5 subject line of emails in order to ensure that the search would  
6 capture records that actually addressed the subjects of the agency  
7 directives and policy, as opposed to a more overwhelming mass of  
8 irrelevant and unresponsive material that could arise from a less-  
9 focused search. In my experience, had the search not been focused  
10 on the subject line, but also extended to any other text it would likely  
11 have hit upon a multitude of irrelevant material instead of records  
12 that actually addressed agency directives or policy. For instance,  
13 references to 2-INFO could appear in emails about maintenance of  
14 computer servers; FOIA processing is a phrase that might appear in  
15 the position description or performance plans of hundreds of FSA  
16 employees for whom FOIA processing is one of their  
17 responsibilities, but have nothing to do with policy or guidance on  
18 processing requests.

19 The search still turned up 29,830 pages of records, “far more than the several hundred pages  
20 that FSA originally anticipated that its new search would find concerning FSA’s FOIA  
21 directives and procedures” (Decl. Buchan ¶ 18). Eventually, the agency turned over nearly all  
22 of the records, but for partial redactions of 153 pages (Dkt. No. 27 Exh. C).

23 *Third*, FSA searched its “electronic files for FOIA documents,” which uncovered a  
24 powerpoint training presentation that had been used to train FOIA processors for the agency at  
25 the state level, totaling 109 pages, turned over in full (Decl. Buchan ¶ 19).

26 Six staff members over a combined one-hundred hours conducted an expedited review of  
27 the 30,204 pages of responsive documents. FSA originally withheld nearly nine-thousand  
28 pages in full pursuant to Exemption 5, released 153 pages in part pursuant to Exemption 6, and  
29 released in full 21,085 pages, including all of FSA’s directives and policies: FSA’s FOIA  
30 handbook, 2-INFO, numerous FOIA notices issued during the period covered by the request,  
31 and the FOIA powerpoint training presentation. A month later, when FSA filed its *Vaughn*  
32 index, the agency discretionally released the nine-thousand pages previously withheld under  
33 Exemption 5, purportedly to avoid litigation over that exemption. The agency thus withheld  
34 only the redacted information contained within the 153 pages discussed, pursuant to  
35 Exemption 6 (Dkt. No. 27 Exh. C).

1 Plaintiffs did not challenge the adequacy of FSA’s *Vaughn* index “[s]o as to prevent  
2 delay on issues not central to the case” — namely, plaintiffs’ pattern-and-practice claims (Mot.  
3 at 5 n.1).

4 To vet the search results, plaintiffs attempted to locate documents it had previously  
5 identified as responsive, including the seven pages of guidance emails that surfaced during the  
6 original search and “discussions within FSA that concern[ed] requests for records” that FSA  
7 had previously withheld in response to a June 2016 request submitted by plaintiff Food &  
8 Water Watch. Neither the emails nor the discussions fell within the agency’s “broad”  
9 supplemental search.

#### 10 ANALYSIS

11 The Freedom of Information Act lets us see what our government is up to by  
12 “provid[ing] public access to official information ‘shielded unnecessarily’ from public view  
13 and establish[ing] a ‘judicially enforceable public right to secure such information from  
14 possibly unwilling official hands.’” *Lahr v. Nat’l Transp. Safety Bd.*, 569 F.3d 964, 973 (9th  
15 Cir. 2009) (quoting *Dep’t of Air Force v. Rose*, 425 U.S. 352, 361 (1976)). It “mandates a  
16 policy of broad disclosure of government documents.” *Church of Scientology of California v.*  
17 *U.S. Dep’t of Army*, 611 F.2d 738, 741 (9th Cir. 1979), *overruled on other grounds*, *Animal*  
18 *Legal Def. Fund v. U.S. Food & Drug Admin.*, 836 F.3d 987 (9th Cir. 2016). Here, plaintiffs  
19 challenge only the adequacy of FSA’s search.

20 Under the FOIA, an agency responding to a request must “demonstrate that it has  
21 conducted a search reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents.” *Lahr*, 569 F.3d  
22 at 986 (quoting *Zemansky v. EPA*, 767 F.2d 569, 571 (9th Cir. 1985)). “This showing may be  
23 made by ‘reasonably detailed, nonconclusory affidavits submitted in good faith.’” *Ibid.* “In  
24 evaluating the sufficiency of an agency’s search, ‘the issue to be resolved is not whether there  
25 might exist any other documents possibly responsive to the request, but rather whether the  
26 search for those documents was adequate.’” *Id.* at 987.

27 The reasonableness of the search is dependent on the circumstances of the case. “An  
28 agency has discretion to conduct a standard search in response to a general request, but it must

1 revise its assessment of what is ‘reasonable’ in a particular case to account for leads that  
2 emerge during its inquiry. Consequently, the court evaluates the reasonableness of an agency’s  
3 search based on what the agency knew at its conclusion rather than what the agency speculated  
4 at its inception.” *Campbell v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 164 F.3d 20, 28 (D.C. Cir. 1998) (applied  
5 by our court of appeals in *Hamdan v. U.S. Dept. of Justice*, 797 F.3d 759, 771 (9th Cir. 2015)).  
6 Significantly, “if a review of the record raises substantial doubt, particularly in view of well-  
7 defined requests and positive indications of overlooked materials, summary judgment is  
8 inappropriate.” *Hamdan*, 797 F.3d at 771.

9 Here, there is no doubt that the agency’s supplemental search uncovered troves of at least  
10 nominally relevant documents. But the relevant question is whether the *search* rated adequate,  
11 not the results. *Lahr*, 569 F.3d at 987. This order finds that FSA’s search was not reasonably  
12 calculated to uncover all relevant documents. The agency’s declaration attempting to  
13 demonstrate the contrary instead raises substantial doubt, abandons the clarifying information  
14 it requested of plaintiffs, and fails to account for positive indications of overlooked materials.  
15 *See Hamdan*, 797 F.3d at 771.

16 *First*, the declaration’s conclusory reasons for searching the subject line of emails for the  
17 chosen search terms only address the avoidance of irrelevant material, rather than demonstrate  
18 that the search was reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents. The latter is what  
19 the government must reasonably show. *Lahr*, 569 F.3d at 986. The declaration explained that  
20 the agency had learned it needed to use “search terms such as these” and “target the subject  
21 line” of emails to “ensure that the search would capture records that actually addressed the  
22 subjects of agency directives and policy, as opposed to a more overwhelming mass of  
23 irrelevant and unresponsive material that could arise from a less-focused search.” The only  
24 possibly nonconclusory point made is that the agency designed the search to avoid capturing  
25 irrelevant and unresponsive material, not that it would uncover all relevant emails. Again, the  
26 latter is what the agency must prove. *Ibid*.

1           The only argument the agency makes in support of its search methods are just as  
2 conclusory. After detailing the large number of documents the search uncovered, the agency  
3 merely states (Opp. at 10):

4           The agency’s search method thus was reasonably calculated to  
5 uncover records responsive to Plaintiff’s request, as the Buchan  
6 declaration illustrates. *See Hamdan v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 797  
7 F.3d 759, 770–72 (9th Cir. 2015) (affirming summary judgment for  
8 Government on “adequacy of the searches” where searching was  
“reasonably calculated to locate responsive records” and “a  
reasonable search is what [the plaintiffs] got”). Accordingly, FSA  
has demonstrated that it conducted a reasonable search for  
responsive records.

9           The agency’s reliance on *Hamdan* falls short. In *Hamdan*, our court of appeals found that the  
10 agency’s decision to search multiple “databases, using many variations of the terms suggested  
11 by [p]laintiffs to account for spelling or other inconsistencies, was a ‘diligent search for . . .  
12 documents in the places in which they might be expected to be found.’” *Hamdan*, 797 F.3d  
13 at 771–72. The agency here presents no such evidence, apparently resting simply on the  
14 number of documents produced. It is the adequacy of the search, however, with which we are  
15 mainly concerned, not the results.

16           *Second*, after spending more than a year clarifying plaintiffs’ request, the agency’s  
17 decision to ignore the clarifying information it sought out and instead to perform the search  
18 based on a plain reading of the original request ranked as unreasonable. *Campbell*, 164 F.3d  
19 at 28. True, plaintiffs made a general request originally. And plaintiffs’ “clarification” of their  
20 original request raised as many questions as it answered (Opp. at 3):

21           We have clarified that we are requesting any internal guidance —  
22 formal or otherwise — including (but not limited to) any directives  
23 or policies instructing FSA officers to look out for certain requests  
from certain groups [*who?*] and/or use select exemptions [*which?*]  
under certain circumstances [*again, which?*].

24           But before FSA offered to re-perform its search and production, plaintiffs answered all three  
25 questions: The “groups” included plaintiffs or other similar advocacy organizations, FOIA  
26 Exemptions 3 and 6 counted as the “exemptions,” and the “circumstances” concerned records  
27 of FSA’s farm loan programs and resulting environmental review. It was in this context,  
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1 notably, that FSA offered to re-perform its search “in an effort to reach an agreed-upon  
2 approach to resolving this litigation” (Opp. at 4).

3 The agency’s renewed search, however, did not factor in any of the clarifying  
4 information it then had. For example, it did not search its records for hits on the plaintiffs’  
5 names (“Public Justice Foundation,” “Animal Legal Defense Fund,” “Center for Biological  
6 Diversity,” “Center for Food Safety,” or “Food & Water Watch”), the two exemptions at issue  
7 (“Exemption 3” or “Exemption 6”), or the subject matter (“farm loan program,” “NEPA,” or  
8 “environmental assessment”). Given that plaintiffs sought records pertaining to how the  
9 agency responds to plaintiffs’ FOIA requests specifically, a reasonable search should have at  
10 least searched using plaintiffs’ names. Instead, the agency unreasonably designed its search to  
11 capture only generally applicable policies.

12 In response, the agency merely points out that the original request did not include the  
13 clarifying information and states plaintiffs should have either drafted their request differently  
14 or submitted a new FOIA request. The agency provides no authority explaining why  
15 subsequent explanatory information from plaintiffs should not be factored into the scope of the  
16 agency’s search, no less one the agency itself volunteered to perform anew.

17 *Finally*, when plaintiffs brought to the agency’s attention “positive indications of  
18 overlooked materials” in the “re-performed” search, the agency took no steps to address the  
19 errors. Those overlooked materials included the only relevant documents the original search  
20 uncovered — the emails providing guidance to FSA state and local offices in responding to the  
21 flood of FOIA requests related to the corn-producer litigation. These emails better track  
22 plaintiffs’ flushed-out request for “internal guidance” looking out for “certain requests” from  
23 “certain groups” under “certain circumstances.” Although the agency could find the emails  
24 regarding the corn litigation in its more narrow search, it proffers no reason why it could not do  
25 so in the re-performed search. Nor does the agency provide any information regarding the  
26 search method or terms used in the initial search. The agency replies simply that it carried out  
27 the two searches differently. “[I]f an agency can so easily avoid adversary scrutiny of its  
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1 search techniques, the Act will inevitably become nugatory.” *Founding Church of Scientology*  
2 *of Washington, D.C., Inc. v. National Security Agency*, 610 F.2d 824, 837 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

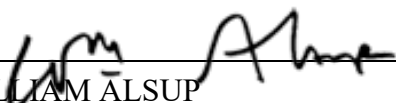
3 It bears stating that the agency’s obfuscation illustrates the necessity of the FOIA’s basic  
4 purpose. Government agencies enjoy an unusually powerful position in FOIA cases, where the  
5 facts, the documents, and the reasons for withholding begin (and often stay) completely within  
6 the agency’s control. “This lack of knowledge by the party seeking disclosure seriously  
7 distorts the traditional adversary nature of our legal system[.]” *See Wiener v. F.B.I.*, 943 F.2d  
8 972, 977 (9th Cir. 1991) (citing *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820, 824 (D.C. Cir. 1973)). Recall,  
9 among other things, the FOIA affords private citizens the ability to hold the government *to its*  
10 *own rules*. *See Oregon Nat’l Desert Ass’n v. Locke*, 572 F.3d 610, 614 (9th Cir. 2009).

11 **CONCLUSION**

12 To the following extent, plaintiffs’ motion is granted. The agency shall please conduct  
13 an adequate search and provide a declaration and *Vaughn* Index demonstrating the adequacy of  
14 the search and justifying any withholdings, by November 5. For the parties’ guidance, an  
15 adequate search should be reasonably calculated to uncover all internal FOIA guidance  
16 applicable to plaintiffs, environmental reviews undertaken in connection with FSA’s farm loan  
17 program, and/or the use of FOIA Exemptions 3 or 6. Plaintiffs are warned, however, that a  
18 search within these parameters will not be viewed as unreasonably narrow. The Court trusts  
19 the parties will work together to ensure any issues are promptly resolved. A further case  
20 management conference is hereby set for November 19. The parties shall please file the usual  
21 joint case management conference by November 12 at noon.

22  
23 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

24  
25 Dated: October 5, 2020.

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28 WILLIAM ALSUP  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE