DEPARTMENT OF
ECOLOGY
State of Washington

Focus on Improving Public Records Management Using ECM

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Special accommodations

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Background

Ecology manages a huge volume of information to accomplish its mission. From major environmental permit and project oversight, to the day-to-day administration of contracts, grants, and loans; records must be managed to do this important environmental work, and in a way that allows timely and accurate response to public records requests.

Over the last decade, Ecology's unstructured electronic records have grown exponentially. Unstructured means the content is not managed according to a file plan or classification system. The records need to be standardized for easy retrieval by Ecology staff or the public in response to records requests.

Ecology has also accumulated an enormous amount of paper records. These records must be manually reviewed when fulfilling public records requests, and it is very difficult, time consuming, and expensive to search and produce them. In large environmental programs, especially, this means resources that should be focused on critical environmental work are shifted to records management and public disclosure activities.

Ecology's records management processes and IT systems are outdated, creating inefficiencies and risks

Ecology's current records management processes and IT systems are outdated, non-standard, or custom developed. This creates significant risks and results in too much staff time to manage and retrieve records, both paper and electronic. Ecology staff reported spending over 22,000 hours in 2017 responding to over 4,000 public records requests, at a cost of about $1.3 million.

For example, Ecology's Water Quality Program has seen its public records requests rise by 218 percent in the last five years. They are on pace to respond to nearly 465 requests in 2018. The Toxics Cleanup Program has redirected a vacant FTE dedicated entirely to records management and public disclosure work.

Also, as a result of untimely and incomplete responses to public records requests, Ecology has incurred $513,795 in Public Records Act (PRA) penalties and opposing attorney fees in nine different legal matters over the last ten years. This number does not include Ecology's defense costs. We are now the primary agency subject to litigation hold in a court case where we have identified over 1.1 million email items and 3,000 linear feet (approximately 5.2 million pages) of paper records potentially relevant to the matter. The importance to Ecology for proper records management and production is enormous.

Ecology proposes Enterprise Content Management (ECM) solution to improve records management

To establish a secure and reliable records management system, Ecology is requesting $3 million a year, starting in the 2019-21 Biennium, for a six-year project to modernize its records management processes and outdated IT systems. This Enterprise Content Management (ECM) solution will consolidate agency records into a single, searchable repository. ECM is an industry best practice for records management and is already used by many other state agencies and local governments, including Department of Financial Institutions, Office of Financial Management, Department of Labor and Industries, Department of Health, and the City of Lacey. This is a high priority (the highest risk category) on Ecology's risk register required under Executive Order 16-06.

In the 2017-19 Biennium, Ecology is conducting a pilot project for an ECM solution. The pilot is developing best practices and establishing an operational and technical framework for agencywide implementation of the proposed solution. The initial hardware and software for the ECM pilot project is being installed and configured at the State Data Center.

Implementing the proposed ECM solution will meet Ecology's objectives to:
- Improve customer satisfaction through quicker access to information, reduced duplication, and increased transparency.
- Simplify and speed up responses to public records and discovery requests by reducing staff time spent searching for and reviewing records.
- Mitigate risk, improve statutory compliance, and reduce liability associated with proper and timely records retention and disposition actions.

Public disclosure and records management solutions work together

In a related operating budget request titled, "Public Disclosure Management," Ecology is requesting $1.3 million in the 2019-21 Biennium to address tracking public disclosure requests and producing the records. Implementing an ECM solution complements that request, because a fully indexed and searchable records repository allows the Public Disclosure Office to efficiently search for records without relying on the time-intensive and duplicative process of individual self-collection.

The budget request for Public Disclosure Management proposes centralizing all public disclosure case management, adding staff to manage that workload, and implementing a centralized public disclosure tracking system. Ecology currently has one of the highest public records requests per FTE in state government, and we do not have adequate resources for processing and responding to the over 4,000 public records requests we receive each year. This has resulted in numerous settlements or awards over the history of the agency.

Ecology's current tracking system cannot manage the Joint Legislative Audit Review Committee (JLARC) public disclosure reporting requirements implemented in 2017. The proposed new tracking system will not only allow us to meet those requirements, it will provide an online web submission portal for the public to submit requests and receive records from Ecology. But that won't be optimized without an ECM solution.

The combination of investments in both records and public disclosure management means dramatic improvements in customer service, more efficiency in-house so Ecology staff can focus on environmental priorities, and significantly reduced financial and legal risk to the agency and the state.