Federal Government Documents Online: An Overview of FDsys

by Anne Lucke

Accessing federal government publications online—including the Code of Federal Regulations, the U.S. Code, Congressional hearings and bills, and court opinions—is easier than ever through the Federal Digital System (FDsys).[1] Unveiled in 2009, FDsys was designed by the Government Printing Office (GPO) to replace its predecessor, GPO Access, as the next generation of online government information.[2] Through FDsys, individuals have free online access to official government documents from all three branches of government. This article discusses several of the primary features of FDsys and provides an overview of content available through the system.

FDsys Home Page

The FDsys home page is laid out in a straightforward manner. The most used feature—the simple search box—is prominently displayed in the center of the screen. Links for performing an advanced search or retrieving documents by citation are located just to the right of the search box. Descriptions of the pilot projects, which periodically change, are below the search box. Documents on FDsys are organized into collections of related documents, such as Federal Register or Public and Private Laws. Featured collections within FDsys are listed in the right-hand column of the home page; clicking on the "Browse Collections" button takes the researcher to a list of all collections on the site. This list includes dates of coverage for each collection, most of which begin with documents from the mid-1990s and continue through the present. All documents are available in PDF format and can be printed or downloaded.

Authenticated Documents

It can be difficult to know whether a document found online is original or whether it has been altered. FDsys solves this problem by offering document authentication.[3] Each PDF document in the system has a small GPO symbol in the upper-left corner stating that it is "Authenticated U.S. Government Information." A blue bar at the top of the document states that it is "Certified by Superintendent of Documents." Clicking into that signature panel reveals more information on the validity of that document, such as whether the document has been modified since it was certified. By verifying these electronic signatures, the researcher can be assured that the information is authentic.

Search Options

FDsys offers three search options. The most simple is the Google-style search box in the center of the home page. Researchers can type in general search terms and get results from all collections included in the system. The results are sorted by relevance, but they can be re-sorted by date or alphabetically. Additionally, by using options in the left-hand panel of the results page, the researcher can filter the results by collection, date, or organization, among other options.

The advanced search option allows the researcher to narrow by date and by collection before running the search. If, for example, only Congressional documents are desired, then the search can be narrowed to only the Congressional collections. The researcher also can select which field to search, such as full-text, Congress number, or title, or can search up to five fields simultaneously. As in the

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general search box, results can be filtered using the links in the left-hand panel.

The retrieve-by-citation option allows the researcher to choose a collection and then prompts the researcher for citation information to locate a specific document. Once the information is entered, the document opens in a new window in PDF format. The document can then be saved or downloaded.

In addition to the three search options, the browse function allows the researcher to choose a collection, Congressional committee, date, or government author and then review all the documents in that category. This is especially helpful for learning about a subject area or to locate a document without a clear citation or description. Again, the results can be filtered using the links in the left-hand panel.

U.S. Court Opinions

Searching U.S. court opinions without access to a paid service is notoriously difficult. In an effort to make federal court opinions more accessible, the GPO and the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts have created a pilot project "to provide public access to opinions from selected United States appellate, district, and bankruptcy courts."[4] Opinions in this collection date back to April 2004 and, because this is a pilot project, not all courts are included. However, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit is participating. Opinions are provided in PDF format exactly as they appear in PACER,[5] with the addition of the FDsys authentication information.

Using the advanced search option, the researcher can choose the U.S. Courts Opinions collection and then search by keyword in full-text, citation, nature of suit, title, and several other options. Results can be filtered using parameters such as date, court name, organization, or circuit. Opinions can be browsed by clicking on the "United States Courts Opinions" link under Featured Collections on the home page. The researcher can drill down by court and year. Opinions are listed by case number, and the researcher can use the find function (CTRL+F) to locate an opinion by specific date or party name. Associated opinions and more information can be found by clicking the "More" link to the right of each opinion.

Executive Branch Regulations and Documents

Executive Branch documents, including the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), are included on FDsys. The CFR collection contains both current and historical versions of the CFR, dating back to 1996.[6] The pages are in PDF format and are identical to the versions that appear in the version printed by the GPO, with the addition of the FDsys digital authentication information. When a new paper edition is released, the digital collection in FDsys also is updated, making the current version immediately available. As with other collections, the CFR collection can be browsed or searched using the simple search box, the advanced search option, or the citation finder.

Because the CFR is printed annually, the researcher needs to review the List of CFR Sections Affected (LSA) to confirm that the section has not been amended or revised since the last print-

ing. FDsys contains the LSA from 1997 in ASCII text and PDF formats. In addition, FDsys offers the ability to "browse CFR Parts Affected from the Federal Register to find final and proposed rules that affect the CFR and have been published in the Federal Register within the past 24 hours, week, month, or within a specific date range."[7] This feature, which can be accessed by clicking the "List of CFR Sections Affected" link under Related Resources, makes researching the CFR through FDSys more efficient than researching in print.

Other Executive Branch documents available through FDsys include the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Compilation of Presidential Documents, and Economic Report of the President. In addition, some Executive Branch agencies are beginning to contribute documents. The GPO and U.S. Department of Treasury recently announced a pilot project to make some historical documents available. According to their press release:

> Through the pilot project, the Treasury Reporting Rates of Exchange, 1956–2005, which list the exchange rates of foreign currencies based on the dollar, are now available on FDsys.[8]

Additional historical content from the Treasury Department will be added over the next year.

Congressional Documents

Researchers looking for Congressional bills, hearings, and reports, as well as statutes and other documents, can find many of them through FDsys. Congressional bills are available in PDF and text format from the 103rd Congress (1993–94) forward. Selected House and Senate Hearings for the 105th Congress (1997–98) forward also are available through FDsys. The Congressional Documents collection includes House documents, Senate documents, and Senate Treaty documents going back to the 99th Congress (1985–86).[9]

As with other collections on FDsys, locating Congressional documents is relatively simple. The first option is to locate the collection using the browse feature. This will display documents by Congress, then by type of document, and then by number. Congressional documents also can be searched or located by citation. In some cases, more than one version of the bill is available, which allows the researcher to see where changes were made through the legislative process.

Current and historical statutes also can be accessed through FDsys in the U.S. Statutes at Large collection. The U.S. Statutes at Large lists laws and resolutions enacted during each section of Congress. Currently, the statutes from the 108th Congress, First Session (Volume 117, Year 2003) through the 111th Congress, First Session (Volume 123, Year 2009) are included, with each new volume being added as it is available. Also, historical versions of the Statutes at Large are being added; the years 1951 through 2002 have been digitized.[10]

Conclusion

FDsys makes locating federal government documents easier and more convenient than ever before. With documents from all three branches of government available digitally, FDsys provides "one-stop shopping" for government publications. Documents are free, and the authentication system allows the researcher to know the documents are original and unaltered. Finally, several search options make finding a specific document or browsing collections of documents easy and convenient. Researchers interested in advanced search techniques for FDsys can view pre-recorded webinars on the GPO website[11] or click the "Help" link located to the right of the simple search box for more information.

Notes

1. U.S. Government Printing Office Federal Digital System (FDsys), www.fdsys.gov.

2. *See* www.gpo.gov/pdfs/fdsys-info/FDsys_FAQ.pdf.

3. More information about authentication on FDsys can be found at www.gpo.gov/authentication/index.htm.

4. For more information about the pilot project, *see* www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action?collectionCode=USCOURTS.

5. Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) is an electronic service that provides access to federal court documents for a small fee. *See* www.pacer.gov.

6. Additional information on the Code of Federal Regulations collection, as well as other collections in FDsys, is available at www.gpo.gov/help/index.html#what_s_available.htm.

7. *See* www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collectionCfrFR.action?collectionCode=CFRPARTS.

8. *See* www.gpo.gov/pdfs/news-media/press/12news44.pdf.

9. *See* www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action?collectionCode=CDOC.

10. *See* www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action?collectionCode=STATUTE.

11. *See* tinyurl.com/FDsysWebinars. ∎