



LEGAL RESEARCH CORNER

Strategies for Finding Administrative Materials Online

by Theresa (Tracy) Leming

Finding specific information online about a government agency sometimes seems as difficult as finding one needle among hundreds of bits of hardware hidden in thousands of haystacks. This article discusses strategies and tools that can make the search easier—the virtual equivalent of the magnets, conveyor belts, rakes, and engineering expertise that would make it possible to find that needle in just a few days.

Making the Most of Google

Some agency opinions and reports can be found online simply by cutting and pasting (or typing) the title or case name and citation into the basic Google search box¹ and clicking the “Google Search” button. This method likely will work if the document is a recent publication and the search includes a very specific title or a quote from the material that uses relatively unusual terms.² For example, the Colorado attorney general opinion³ “Appropriation of Conservation Trust Fund Monies for Auditing Fund Expenditures (March 2, 2004)” can be found by entering that phrase in Google and performing a search. The first two results lead to this document.⁴ This direct Google ap-

proach also is one of the best strategies for locating a document that was printed without its Internet address. The user cuts and pastes (or types) the title or a paragraph or two of text and scans the results list.⁵

The direct Google approach does not always produce the required information at the top of the list on the first search. However, Google can be used as a first step in more powerful search strategies. The simplest of these strategies is to use Google to find a news story or advocacy site that has a link to the original document. For example, performing a Google search using the phrase “rocky flats cleanup” leads to the website of the Rocky Flats Citizens Advisory Board.⁶ This site has a link called “About Rocky Flats,” which links to the official Rocky Flats closure site.⁷

The other strategy is more complex, but it is worth learning because it can essentially create a search tool for any website, whether or not the site provides a search box. To use this strategy, the user first finds the desired website (with Google or any other tool), and then copies the domain name⁸ into a Google search box. Next, the user types “site:” before the domain and then types terms relevant to the search after the domain. For example, if the user wants to find out whether it is safe to eat deer that grazed on Rocky Flats⁹ from the Rocky Flats closure site¹⁰ (which does not include an internal search box), the user can go to Google, enter “site:192.149.55.183 deer,” and then select the “Google Search” button. The first result is a document on exactly this topic.¹¹

Lawyers who are familiar with Westlaw® legal research¹² and LexisNexis® researching¹³ sometimes are frustrated by the

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Theresa (Tracy) Leming is a reference librarian at Brownstein Hyatt & Farber. She is chair of the Public Relations Committee and is Library School/Recruitment Liaison for the Colorado Association of Law Libraries—(303) 223-1368, tleming@bhf-law.

fact that Google does not highlight search terms in the documents it retrieves. There are two easy ways around this problem. The first is simultaneously pressing the "Ctrl" and "F" keys to produce a search box within the document. This command works in both HTML and searchable PDF (portable document format) files,¹⁴ and allows users to skip from one instance of the word to the next, like the term navigation feature in Westlaw or Lexis. The second solution is more flexible and sophisticated, but it works only on searchable PDF files. The user clicks on the binoculars icon in the Adobe Reader toolbar at the top of a PDF file, which produces a sidebar that lists every instance of the search term in context and allows users to jump directly to any instance of the term.

Google is not particularly effective at finding agency opinions or other materials that: (1) do not include unique or unusual terms; (2) are several years old; or (3) are stored in databases, personal directories, or password-protected sites (sometimes called the "invisible Web" or "deep Web").¹⁵ For these kinds of materials, other strategies are required. The most important of these strategies is simply to realize that it is not necessary to spend hours trying to make Google work, because there are other options.

Using Other Search Engines And Web Finding Tools

Google is the largest and most popular search engine at the moment.¹⁶ However, other search engines and online finding aids are better at finding some administrative materials.

One of the best alternatives for finding both federal and state administrative materials is FirstGov,¹⁷ a directory and search engine specifically designed for finding local, state, and federal government information online. For example, to find what Colorado agencies are doing about trichomoniasis,¹⁸ click on the tiny "advanced search" button in the upper right-hand corner of the FirstGov home page, and then use the pull-down menu next to "search in" to limit the search to Colorado. This technique produces more results than simply doing a Google search limited to Colorado's biggest domain, state.co.us,¹⁹ because the FirstGov database includes the domains of counties and other parts of the government that are not part of the official state website. FirstGov also clusters results into subject groups and can be used to drill down through categories to specific agency opinions, reports, or regulations.

Another online tool for finding federal agency publications is GPO Access,²⁰ the Government Printing Office's ("GPO") website. This site purports to provide the "official, published version" of federal government documents.²¹ It provides PDF versions of many of the basic federal administrative documents, including the Code of Federal Regulations and the Federal Register. However, there is no easy way to confirm that a document retrieved from GPO Access is actually the same as the printed version.²² Also, GPO Access's search interface can be frustrating for attorneys who are used to Lexis or Westlaw, because the search syntax is different and the displayed results can be difficult to decipher.

Google's new U.S. Government Search provides a more familiar interface.²³ This new service features headlines from

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SCOTT F. SULLAN, Esq.	SUITE 850
RONALD M. SANDGRUND, Esq.	1875 LAWRENCE STREET
CURT T. SULLAN, Esq.	DENVER, CO 80202
JOSEPH F. SMITH, Esq.	(303) 779-0077
MARCI M. ACHENBACH, Esq.	FAX: (303) 779-4924
LESLIE A. TUFT, Esq.	

DEAN R. VANATTA, Esq. (OF COUNSEL)

both agency Web pages and news organizations and allows users to bring in headlines from other RSS (really simple syndication) feeds.²⁴ Unlike its predecessor, Google Uncle Sam, this service reaches state and local government sites and includes websites that use domain names other than those ending with “.mil” and “.us.” It also allows users to run an advanced search limited to government sources.²⁵

Exploring Agency Websites

If these search engines do not lead to the missing needle within approximately ten minutes, it is time to try another strategy: agency websites. These websites provide a sense of context that is missing from aggregated legal databases. In other words, searching for a regulation, opinion, or other document in an agency website is like using trees and buildings for landmarks and asking for hints from the person who hid the needle, whereas searching for the same information in a big legal database (such as Westlaw, Lexis, Casemaker,[®] or Loislaw[®]) is like wading through an infinite field of hay.

For example, a search on the term “trichomoniasis” in the Code of Colorado Regulations on either Westlaw or Lexis produces only a list of the three Colorado regulations that include this term—two from the Department of Agriculture and one from the Department of Public Health and Environment. The home page of the Livestock Disease Section of the Department of Agriculture,²⁶ on the other hand, provides not only a link to the text of its trichomoniasis regulations, but also definitions and explanations of the disease, guidelines for interpreting the regulations, links to companies that test for the disease, and telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for questions about the regulations. Finding such a page is sometimes challenging—in this case, the user must: (1) find the Colorado Department of Agriculture home page;²⁷ (2) select “Animal Industry” from the “Program Areas” drop-down menu; and then (3) select the “Livestock Disease” link, located on the right side of the Web page. However, the process itself provides a sense of context, and the extra effort often pays off with a rich collection of on-point information.

The simplest way to find an agency’s home page is to perform a search using the agency’s name in Google. If this does not work, and if a federal entity is involved, the A–Z Agency Index on FirstGov²⁸ or Louisiana State University’s list of agencies²⁹ may work.

For federal regulations, the best place to start is Regulations.gov,³⁰ which links to existing regulations, tracks proposed regulations, and allows electronic submission of comments on proposed regulations. GPO Access also provides full-text access to the Code of Federal Regulations in both PDF and HTML formats, but the GPO Access interface is not as user-friendly as the one at Regulations.gov.³¹

If a scientific or technical report by a federal agency is the object of the search, one of the best places to start is the National Technical Information Service (“NTIS”),³² which indexes federal agency reports. Searching the NTIS index is free, but this database includes only citations; after finding a citation to a potentially useful report, a user may purchase the report from NTIS or go to a library to get the full text. Also, the NTIS database does not include reports issued before 1990.

For regulations issued or proposed by Colorado agencies, some good places to start are the Office of Legislative Legal Council’s directory,³³ which links to rules and regulations with-

in each agency; and the Department of Regulatory Agencies’ list of proposed regulations, which links to the full text of proposed regulations and provides contacts for comments and details of hearings.³⁴

The biggest drawback to searching any agency website is that, usually, only relatively current materials are available. For older materials, other tools, such as depository libraries or more expensive legal databases, are required.

Using Subscription Legal Databases

Starting a search for a regulation or agency opinion on Westlaw or Lexis is a little like hopping onto a tractor to search for a needle in a haystack simply because the tractor is powerful, convenient, and familiar—never mind that a tractor alone is worse than useless for finding a needle in a haystack! Documents in large databases like these are stripped of the context provided by the agency’s own website. Also, in the larger databases, results lists often are cluttered with secondary materials, court cases, and other sources that are not relevant. Thus, documents found in subscription legal databases sometimes are both more expensive and less valuable than the free agency website versions. However, either Westlaw or Lexis eventually will provide just about any relatively recent regulation or official agency opinion published by a Colorado or federal agency. Also, Westlaw and Lexis provide a familiar and powerful search interface, a variety of choices to make the search for legal materials as wide or as narrow as necessary, and editorial enhancements that are not available from agency websites. Thus, in some cases, subscription legal databases are the best tools for finding administrative materials.

Westlaw

The best way to see all the Colorado administrative resources available on Westlaw is to start at the Directory and select “States,” then “Colorado,” and then “Administrative and Executive Materials.” Searching the directory for “Colorado” or using the Colorado tab does *not* reveal all of the relevant databases. The Code of Colorado Regulations is included in a Westlaw database named CO-ADC (Colorado Administrative Code). Superseded versions of the Code are in CO-ADC05, CO-ADC04, and so on, back to 2002.

Westlaw recently improved its Code of Federal Regulations (“CFR”) database by adding editorial enhancements similar to those normally found in statutory codes (hierarchically arranged links back to the table of contents above each section, an editorially created index, Keycite flags and links, and indexed annotations). However, there are additional fees for access to this database (“RegulationsPlus”).

Lexis

Lexis also includes the current version of the Code of Colorado Regulations and quite a few agency opinions from Colorado. The best way to find the complete list of Colorado administrative sources on Lexis is to go to the “Legal” tab on the “Search” directory, and then to select “Legal,” “States,” “Colorado,” and then “Agency and Administrative Materials.” Lexis does not have a separate directory for superseded versions of Colorado regulations, but the text of some regulations (back to about 2002) is included in “RegAlert.” Lexis enhances its Colorado regulations database with annotations of opinions from the Colorado Attorney General following each section.

Ask a Librarian

Reference librarians use the Internet to find information throughout the day, every day, and most of them have developed effective search strategies and techniques as a result of that practice. Also, reference librarians have access to specialized tools for finding administrative materials that are not available to most attorneys, such as the Law Library Microform Consortium's collection of federal materials.³⁵

Reference librarians employed by firms, law schools, and agencies often are a good resource for attorneys. In addition, most reference librarians at the Colorado Supreme Court Library,³⁶ the University of Colorado School of Law,³⁷ or the Westminster Law Library in the University of Denver Sturm College of Law³⁸ are familiar with Colorado agency resources.

Administrative documents are part of the larger category of government documents, and government documents librarians are experts on finding materials such as old agency opinions and reports. Many older government documents are not listed individually in any electronic catalog, and are accessible only through printed indexes. However, these librarians know where the indexes can be found and which indexes cover particular agency publications.

Government documents librarians are available at each of Colorado's Federal Depository Libraries. (See accompanying sidebar entitled "Federal Depository Libraries.") They also are available at Government Information Online,³⁹ a nonprofit website that provides expert government documents reference service to the public through e-mail and chat rooms.

Conclusion

Finding one needle among hundreds of bits of hardware hidden in thousands of haystacks is a difficult task, but it is not impossible for a person with adequate resources and management skills. Similarly, quickly finding accurate, current information published by or about administrative agencies online is difficult, but not impossible, for a person who knows when and how to use Google, when to use other search engines and Web-finding tools, how to get the most from agency websites, when to turn to a legal database, and when to ask for help from an expert—a librarian.

NOTES

1. Available at <http://www.google.com>.
2. If the words are fairly common and you are using exact text, surrounding the search terms with quotation marks may produce better results.
3. Colorado Bar Association members also can access the full text of Colorado attorney general opinions from 1984 to present at no cost through the Casemaker® Research Library. With Casemaker, attorney general opinions can be retrieved through full-text searches, opinion numbers, or petitioner names. To access Casemaker, go to <http://www.cobar.org> and click on the blue and white Casemaker logo.
4. On May 7, 2006, the first result of this search (without quotes) was a link to the actual opinion: <http://www.ago.state.co.us/agogin>

Federal Depository Libraries*

Partial Depositories

Colorado Supreme Court Library
B112 State Judicial Bldg.
2 E. 14th Ave.
Denver, CO 80203
(303) 837-3720 • (800) 888-0001
<http://www.state.co.us/courts/sctlib>

University of Colorado—Boulder Law Library
2405 Kittredge Loop Dr.
Boulder, CO 80309
(303) 492-3522
<http://www.colorado.edu/law/lawlib>

University of Denver Sturm College of Law
Westminster Law Library
2255 E. Evans Ave.
Denver, CO 80208
(303) 871-6206
<http://www.law.du.edu/library/asklib.cfm>

Full Depositories

University of Colorado at Boulder
Norlin Library
1720 Pleasant St.
Boulder, CO 80309
(303) 492-8834
<http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/govpubs/index.htm>

Denver Public Library
10 W. 14th Ave. Pkwy.
Denver, CO 80204
(720) 865-1712
<http://denverlibrary.org/research/government>

*For a complete list of federal depository libraries, visit <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/libraries.html>.

ions/AGO_PDFs/AGO04-2.pdf. The second result was a link to a list of all Colorado attorney general opinions published in 2004: <http://www.ago.state.co.us/agoginops/AGO04.cfm>. This opinion is the fourth item on the list.

5. There are two simple steps for quickly finding the online source of documents printed from the Internet. First, using Internet Explorer, print the Internet address ("URL") of the source as a header or footer on every Web page printed. To do this, open the browser, go to File > Page Setup, and make sure the code "&u" is in either the header or footer box. To see all the codes that can be put into these boxes and what each code means, go to Help > Content and Indexes and search for "printing URL." Unfortunately, this technique does not work for portable document format ("PDF") files, so users will have to take a second step to make sure they can find a PDF again: after printing the file, click the "back" button, and then print that page, which should have the link that led to the file. Highlight the link and keep this page with the rest of the document.

6. Available at <http://www.rfcab.org>.

7. Available at <http://192.149.55.183>.

8. The domain name is the part of a Web address between "www." and the first forward slash. For example, in the address http://www.cobar.org/tcl/tcl_vol.cfm?issue=current, the domain name is "cobar.org." The Rocky Flats closure website is unusual in that it does not have an alphabetical domain name, but only a "raw" IP address. Every website has a numerical IP address, but most people generally do not use these addresses because most websites also have an alphabetical address that is translated back into an IP address by a domain name service. The alphabetical domain name is simply a device to make Internet addresses easier to remember.

9. Rocky Flats is a "former nuclear weapons facility." See Rocky Flats Closure Project, <http://192.149.55.183>.

10. Available at <http://192.149.55.183>.

11. As of May 7, 2006, the first result of this search was a link to a PDF of an appendix to a report, *Potential Risks Associated with Human Consumption of Tissues from Rocky Flats Deer / Grazing Animals*, http://192.149.55.183/CTSM/vol2/Vol2_Appendix%20A.pdf.

12. Available at <http://web2.westlaw.com>.

13. Available at <http://www.lexis.com>.

14. HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is the language used to create most Web pages. PDF is a file format created by Adobe to allow sharing of documents created by just about any program, including

word processors, spreadsheets, and graphics programs. Some PDFs are searchable because the characters are recognized as letters and words. Other PDFs, however, are only images, like photocopies, and cannot be searched electronically.

15. For help finding Colorado legal materials on the invisible Web, see Sucha, "Searching Smarter: Finding Legal Resources on the Invisible Web," 34 *The Colorado Lawyer* 37 (Feb. 2005).

16. Barker, "The BEST Search Engines," *UC Berkeley—Teaching Library Internet Workshops* (May 4, 2006), available at <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/SearchEngines.html>.

17. Available at <http://www.firstgov.gov>.

18. Trichomoniasis is a disease that affects both cattle and humans.

19. Colorado's official website is <http://www.colorado.gov>, but the pages within this domain are only directories. Most of the regulations, opinions, guidelines, and other agency publications are actually in a domain called XXX.state.co.us, with "XXX" standing for an abbreviation for the agency name. For example, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation's domain is <http://www.cbi.state.co.us> and the Secretary of State's domain is <http://www.sos.state.co.us>. Most states follow a similar pattern, using the state's two-digit postal abbreviation instead of "co" as the primary domain.

20. Available at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov>.

21. "About GPO Access," last updated April 28, 2005, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/about>.

22. The Government Printing Office is currently working on a system that will allow it to determine the authenticity of online documents by applying a digital signature to its PDF files. However, that system is not yet in place. "Depository Library Council, Update" (April 2006), http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/pubs/proceedings/06spring/gpo_update_spring06.pdf.

23. Available at <http://www.google.com/ig/usgov>.

24. RSS (really simple syndication) is a family of Web feed formats specified in XML and used for Web syndication. RSS is used by (among other things) news websites, Web logs, and podcasting.

25. For more information, see Garvin, "The Government Domain: Google's New U.S. Government Search," *LLRX.com* (June 18, 2006), available at <http://www.llrx.com/columns/govdomain17.htm>.

26. Available at http://www.ag.state.co.us/animals/livestock_disease/livestock_disease.html.

27. Available at <http://www.ag.state.co.us>.

28. Available at http://www.firstgov.gov/Agencies/Federal/All_Agencies.

29. Available at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/gov/fedgov.html>.

30. Available at <http://www.regulations.gov>.

31. GPO Access (<http://www.gpoaccess.gov>) has the current version of the Code of Federal Regulations ("CFR") and superseded editions back to 1996 or 1997, depending on the title. The CFR, as accessed through GPO Access, is searchable by subject, although the syntax can be awkward for users accustomed to Westlaw® and Lexis®. This version also is searchable by citation, using the "Browse and/or search the CFR" button under the search box. Sections of the CFR that are accessed this way will be PDF files, and the interface is very basic. On the other hand, searches in the CFR that are begun at Regulations.gov (<http://www.regulations.gov>), lead to e-CFR, a beta test site that has a more user-friendly, table-of-contents-like chart to get to the regulations, which are in HTML, and therefore much easier to navigate online.

32. Available at <http://www.ntis.gov>.

33. Available at http://www.state.co.us/gov_dir/leg_dir/olls/HTML/rules.htm.

34. Available at http://www.dora.state.co.us/pls/real/sb121_web_search_form.

35. For more information about this tool, see the Law Library Microform Consortium home page at <http://www.llmc.com>.

36. See <http://www.state.co.us/courts/sctlib>.

37. See <http://www.colorado.edu/law/lawlib>.

38. See <http://www.law.du.edu/library/asklib.cfm>.

39. Available at <http://govtinfo.org>. ■

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Littleton Law Center
1901 W. Littleton Blvd., Suite 260
Littleton, CO 80120-2058
E-mail: criswell1956@aol.com
Tel: (303) 864-1664
Fax: (303) 798-2526