

Introducing Govinfo: A New Source for Federal Government Documents Online

by Erik Beck

Since 2009, the Federal Digital System (FDsys.gov) has provided free online access to legal publications from the three branches of the U.S. government.¹ Until now, it has been the only place on the Web where researchers could obtain official government documents that had been certified as authentic.² Last year the Government Publishing Office (GPO) launched “govinfo,” a new, upgraded platform for accessing federal government information. Though still in its beta release, govinfo (www.govinfo.gov) already offers a number of improvements over FDsys. This article examines the upgrades introduced in the govinfo beta release, with special focus on interface design, search capability, and document cross-referencing. It also examines the extent of coverage for legal material and gives researchers a sense of how govinfo might be best used for legal research.

What’s New?

Govinfo replicates the functionality and content on FDsys, but surpasses its predecessor with enhanced usability and design. Responding to feedback collected over several years from FDsys users, GPO has tailored govinfo to match the common researcher’s needs. It corrects many of the problems that have dogged FDsys since its initial release and inaugurates a few new features that users have long requested.

Design

The most noticeable difference between govinfo and FDsys is the new, modern-looking interface. Extraneous text and links have been eliminated from the home page and the text size is larger, to improve readability. The new layout distributes content farther

down the page, away from the site’s search tools. Information is much easier to assimilate from govinfo than it is in the FDsys interface, which crowds content into narrow columns and hides higher-priority items amid a clutter of less important features and text.

Resized browser windows demonstrate govinfo’s responsive-design³ accommodations for phones and tablets. GPO designed three distinct interfaces that optimize for different-size screens. Flow between the three layouts is seamless, and little to no functionality is lost for smaller-size formats. (See Fig. 1.)

Searching

When FDsys was released in 2009, it presented major advances in search capability over its predecessor system, GPO Access.⁴ Users could search government documents using a citation or a simple keyword, and then further refine search results with filters for government author, date range, and collection. Govinfo retains the FDsys search options but offers better performance and more relevant results, thanks to a more sophisticated search engine that retrieves and ranks information faster and with better precision than the dated FDsys search.⁵

Govinfo offers more browse options than FDsys; FDsys only facilitated browsing within collections, requiring users to “drill down” through several layers of organization to get to a particular document. In govinfo, documents are reorganized into five new organizational schemes that allow users to discover documents in different contexts. Users can browse all documents published within a certain date range, regardless of source, or browse entirely by source by pulling all documents produced by a specific executive agency or legislative committee. Additionally, search results can be filtered



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Figure 1. Resized interfaces for mobile phone, tablet, and PC.

using these same browse categories, and the new system allows users to apply more than one filter at a time.

Cross-Referenced Documents

Govinfo excels most over FDsys in its “Related Documents” feature. Using meticulously crafted metadata, govinfo allows users to cross-reference individual documents with similar content across disparate publications and collections. For example, if a user were looking at a proposed rule in the Federal Register and the rule had been adopted and codified, the Related Documents section of the rule’s details page would provide a link to the regulation in the Code of Federal Regulations. The user would also be able to locate references to the rule that appear elsewhere in the Federal Register. (See Fig. 2).

Content Details
79 FR 44327 - Sale and Disposal of National Forest System Timber; Forest Products for Tradition and Cultural Purposes

Summary | Document in Context | **Related Documents**

Code of Federal Regulations

Parks, Forests, and Public Property

Citation	Name	Date	
36 CFR 223	SALE AND DISPOSAL OF NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM TIMBER, SPECIAL FOREST PRODUCTS, AND FOREST BOTANICAL PRODUCTS	07/01/2015	DETAILS

Federal Register Documents Related by Regulation Identification Number (RIN)

Citation	Name	Action	Date	
81 FR 65891	Sale and Disposal of National Forest System Timber; Forest Products for Traditional and Cultural Purposes	Final rule.	09/26/2016	DETAILS

Figure 2. Users can use the “Related Documents” tab to find this rule as codified in the Code of Federal Regulations and its final version elsewhere in the Federal Register.

Govinfo’s “Related Documents” cross-referencing feature is most developed for legislative material. It allows the researcher to follow the enactment of a statute through its entire legislative history. Starting from a bill as first introduced in Congress, the user can find the different versions of the bill that were submitted for vote, follow the bill’s passage as a public or private law, view the published law in the Statutes at Large, and see the revision of the statute as it appears in the U.S. Code. (See Fig. 3.)

What’s Available?

Govinfo hosts all the same content currently housed in FDsys.⁶ All documents are authenticated using the same methods as FDsys and are available in several formats, including PDF and computer-readable XML for large-scale downloads. Content in govinfo is updated at the same frequency as FDsys and remains, along with other government websites with which it shares content, the most current collection of primary federal legal publications available online.

The following is a partial list of the legal publications hosted on govinfo and the historical range of the collections:

Legislative Branch

- Congressional Record—1991 to present
- Congressional bills—103rd Congress (1993 to 1994) to present
- Public and private laws (slip laws)—104th Congress (1995 to 1996) to present
- U.S. Statutes at Large—82nd Congress (1951) (vol. 65) to 2011
- U.S. Code—1994 to present

Executive Branch

- Federal Register—1994 to present
- Code of Federal Regulations—1996 to present

Judicial Branch

- U.S. Courts Opinions (select appellate, district, and bankruptcy courts, U.S. Court of International Trade)—2004 to present

Content Details

H.R. 3590 (enr) - Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

Summary Related Documents

H.R. 3590 (enr) - Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
 Sponsor: Rangel, Charles B.
 Committee Assignment:
 Committee on Ways and Means

Bill versions

Issued Date	Version	
09/17/2009	Introduced in House (ih)	DETAILS
10/08/2009	Engrossed in House (eh)	DETAILS
10/13/2009	Placed on Calendar Senate (pcs)	DETAILS
11/19/2009	Amendment Ordered to be Printed Senate (as)	DETAILS
12/24/2009	Engrossed Amendment Senate (eas)	DETAILS
12/24/2009	Public Print (pp)	DETAILS
03/22/2010	Enrolled Bill (enr)	DETAILS

Presidential Signing Statements and Remarks

Public and Private Laws

Statutes at Large

U.S. Code

Figure 3. Users can find different versions of the Affordable Care Act voted on in Congress, as well as its publication in the Statutes at Large and codification in the U.S. Code.

Govinfo hosts many more government publications in addition to those listed above.⁷ In all, the collection contains over 1.5 million titles and is always growing.⁸ The GPO adds newly produced publications every day and is overseeing efforts to add more historical documents as well. Currently, the GPO is digitizing the entire run of the Federal Register (1936 to present) and will be adding this material to govinfo on a continuing basis.⁹

Conclusion

Govinfo is changing the way users find federal government information online. Like its precursor FDsys, it is a one-stop shop for authenticated, up-to-date federal legal publications, and with new features like related document referencing and options to browse material by author and date, govinfo offers even more tools for legal research. The GPO has indicated that users can expect much more from govinfo over the next couple of years. Researchers should look forward to enhanced Related Documents cross-referencing, deeper coverage of historical documents,¹⁰ and new search filters.¹¹ While govinfo is still in its beta phase, GPO is collecting feedback from users to help identify future development goals. Users should submit their suggestions at www.govinfo.gov.

Notes

1. Lucke, "Federal Government Documents Online: An Overview of FDsys," 42 *The Colorado Lawyer* 49 (Feb. 2013).
2. "Authentication Information," GPO (Oct. 19, 2016), www.gpo.gov/authentication/index.htm.
3. Responsive Web design is the use of CSS and HTML to resize, hide, shrink, enlarge, or move content to make it fit to different-size screens. "HTML Responsive Web Design," W3schools.com (Oct. 21, 2016), www.w3schools.com/html/html_responsive.asp.
4. Jackson, "Great dot-gov Web Sites 2009," GCN (July 27, 2009), https://gcn.com/Articles/2009/07/27/GCN-Great-Gov-Web-Sites-2009.aspx?sc_lang=en&Page=6.
5. Kanowitz, "How Govinfo Keeps Pace with Users," GCN (Feb. 18, 2016), https://gcn.com/articles/2016/02/18/govinfo-upgrade.aspx?admga=TC_Mobile.
6. "Frequently Asked Questions | govinfo," GPO (Sept. 27, 2016), www.govinfo.gov/help/faqs#whats-available.
7. Researchers can browse the entire collection at www.govinfo.gov/browse-a-z.
8. "GPO Launches Govinfo," GPO (2016), www.gpo.gov/newsroom-media/presspage/16presspage01.
9. Ebanues and Ramos, "Digitizing the Historic Federal Register," 6 *FDLP Connection* (Jan./Feb. 2016), www.fdlp.gov/all-newsletters/featured-articles/2505-digitizing-the-historic-federal-register.
10. "Meet govinfo | govinfo," GPO (Sept. 27, 2016), www.govinfo.gov/features/news/meet-govinfo#related-documents.
11. "July 2016 Release | Govinfo," GPO (Sept. 27, 2016), www.govinfo.gov/features/july-2016-release. ■