

FBI Chief Floats Proposal To Alter Information Act

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Without going through the administration's normal legislative review procedures, FBI Director William H. Webster has sent Congress a detailed proposal calling for massive changes in the Freedom of Information Act so as to avoid mandatory disclosure of many records.

Under the proposal, the FBI would not have to disclose records of investigations in four top-priority areas — organized crime, terrorism, foreign intelligence and foreign counterintelligence.

Webster's proposal would allow a seven-year delay in disclosure of records pertaining to all other investigations.

The 44-page proposal was sent to key members of Congress early this week without the normal clearance through the Office of Management and Budget. The FBI refused to release a copy, but The Washington Star obtained one from other sources.

Ironically, the Justice Department,

which is responsible for coordinating freedom-of-information policy throughout the executive branch, has been formulating separate proposals of its own for the past six months.

ATTORNEY GENERAL Griffin Bell, before leaving to visit the Soviet Union earlier this month, apparently gave Webster special permission to float his proposal.

Robert L. Saloschin, the Justice official in charge of FOI policy, said yesterday, "You have to assume that since Judge Webster has strong ideas and real problems in this area, Bell felt he should be free to respond to requests from various congressmen and senators with ideas of his own."

Saloschin said the FBI proposals "mesh with" and do not undercut the department's efforts.

The FBI proposals are sure to generate controversy, especially in Congress, where there is a tradition of support for a strong information law.

Webster's proposal would greatly expand the timetable for an agency to respond to an information request, making the time limits proportional to the amount of work required. The proposal would allow 60 working days, or three months, for every 200 pages of records that must be processed, up to a maximum reply time of one year.

UNDER THE LAW as it now stands, a federal agency is supposed to make records available within 10 working days. The law allows 10 additional days "in unusual circumstances," but the FBI and a number of other agencies regularly fail to meet these deadlines.

The FBI said it now found itself in a "vicious circle," with unfilled requests leading to lawsuits that detract from the bureau's ability to respond to other requests.

Webster promised that the FBI would not use the seven-year moratorium "in concert with a file-destruction program to frustrate the Freedom of Information Act."