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Freedom of Information Bjt 430, 2 Takes 580

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON AP - Federal agencies begin working Tuesday under a new Freedom of Information Act but few of them expect important changes in the way they disclose public records.

Despite this consensus among administrators, congressional supporters of the law say they will make sure it is observed.

The man who sponsored the measure in the House-Rep. John Moss, D-Calif.,-says the final verdict on the law's effectiveness will be handed down by John Q. Public.

"The objective of the new law is clear," said Moss. "How well it works will depend on how effectively people exercise their guarantee of access to the facts of government."

Sen. Edward V. Long, D-Mo., Senate sponsor of the bill, said he is "sure that there are bureaucrats who are going to hang on to their secrecy until the bitter end."

But, Long added, "we've worked far too long and hard on this law to see it mangled by federal red tape."

One agency official, questioned in an Associated Press survey to see how the new law will change procedures, replied: "I don't see three cents worth of difference."

Several other administrators said they think the law is confusing and open to different interpretations. And Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark said "definitive answers may have to await court rulings."

The law provides that any citizen may see any government document in the files-but lists nine categories of material which are exempt from this stipulation. These range from defense secrets to inter-agency memos to files which, if made public, would invade an individual's privacy.

As for files not exempt under the new law, many agencies said in the AP survey that they have been making them available to the public all along.

A typical comment in this regard came from George Christian, the White House press secretary, who said: "We give you everything that isn't classified."

That doesn't mean, however, that the average citizen is going to get an inside view of the presidency just for the asking.

Christian also noted that routine working papers are stamped "for administrative use only," which in effect makes them secret. It came to light recently that one White House aide was stamping newspaper clippings "confidential."

Several agencies have or plan to set up public reading rooms where documents would be available for inspection. The idea is to make it easier for the public to get at the records they want.

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As the new law went into effect, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara moved to throw out a six-year-old Pentagon policy that has been a prime target of news media criticism.

Called the "monitor rule," the directive required that Pentagon officials have another Defense Department man by their side whenever they talked to newsmen.

McNamara said the rule originally was intended to prevent intraservice rivalry by blocking attempts by any spokesman for one of the services to plead his favorite cause through the news media.

He said the directive was junked because: "While there will always be some degree of parochialism, special pleading by narrow special interests has largely been ended within the department."

McNamara's action was not directly related to the new Freedom of Information Act, which will have little effect at the Pentagon because so much defense and military information is classified.

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