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Public Held Thwarted on Data Access

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 21 —

A House subcommittee reported today that "foot-dragging by the Federal bureaucracy" had impeded the effective operation of the Freedom of Information Act.

The findings of the Government Operations Subcommittee were based on 41 days of hearings into the administration of the freedom of information law that went into effect five years ago.

The subcommittee reported that the law had opened access to some previously denied Government information. But the panel accused Federal departments and agencies of delays in providing requested data, of charging excessive fees for copies of documents and of other intentional or unintentional thwarting of the public's right to know.

The report on Administration of the Freedom of Information Act was compiled by another House subcommittee headed by William M. Moorhead, Democrat of Pennsylvania.

The law is designed to provide public access to most types of Government information, with certain exceptions, such as trade secrets, law enforcement investigations and various financial and commercial data.

Furthermore, the law exempts information that the President specifically orders be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy.

The subcommittee was highly critical of bureaucratic delays of weeks and months in providing requested data. The panel also noted what it called "a relative lack of utilization

of the act by the news media," which had pushed for the legislation.

The subcommittee also was critical of what it called the tendency of some government agencies to confuse "public information with "image-making."

The report cited a case in which the Interior Department had hired a former Nixon campaign aide, Harry Treleven, to recommend improvements in the department's public information programs.

The department subsequently refused to make public the Treleven report, even when

asked to do so under the Freedom of Information Act, the subcommittee reported. Finally, the report continues, the department did make public the report but it had censored one paragraph.

The subcommittee said it had later learned that the censored paragraph stated that Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton "is the most photogenic member of the Administration" and the department's communications program should give him "maximum exposure" in order to build "valuable goodwill for the department and the Administration."