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Right to know - more power to people

Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — Americans' right to know what their government is up to will be bolstered this week when amendments to the 1966 Freedom of Information Act go into effect.

Starting Wednesday, citizens will have quicker, freer and broader access to information in government files about federal policies, programs and procedures.

The new amendments, en-

acted by Congress last November over President Ford's veto, will probably be of most immediate practical value to journalists, scholars, lawyers, lawmakers and public interest groups.

But any citizen will have the same right to invoke the new law as those whose job is to collect, analyze and interpret government information.

In general, the amendments will require federal

officials to:

- Respond in a short, prescribed time-period to requests for information.

- Spell out the reasons for refusing to comply with such requests.

- Be prepared to justify in detail the reasons for putting security classifications on certain information.

- Establish clear and reasonable procedures and fees

for furnishing information to those who request it.

"Under the new law," said James Kronfeld, counsel for the House subcommittee on government information and individual rights, "the burden of proof for refusing to furnish information falls on the government."

Even certain national security and investigatory information, rendered immune to freedom of informa-

tion suits by past court decisions, could conceivably be released under the new law.

"If a federal judge, in private chambers, finds that information of this sort is improperly classified or is not otherwise exempt for other reasons," Kronfeld said, "the affected agency will have to give it up. There will be no more hiding behind phony classification stamps."