

## Information Access

# Secrecy Stall --House Unit

WASHINGTON — A House committee concludes that the Freedom of Information Act, intended to make government information more available, "has been hindered by five years of foot-dragging by the federal bureaucracy."

The House Government Operations Committee said in a report yesterday that Congress should pass legislation to curb various abuses.

Committee members said almost every federal agency was guilty of abuses and that they included excessive delays in giving out information, excessive fees for gathering information, and bureaucratic tricks to prevent disclosure of information.

The report said that the federal bureaucracy "frequently has negated the basic purpose of the act."

### 33 Days

It took federal agencies an average of 33 days to respond to individual requests for information, the congressmen said. They said this often made information useless, especially to reporters.

Some agencies, the report added, "have harassed citizens who had the temerity to press their demands for public records; others, when forced to provide copies of government documents, have given out illegible copies."

In a statement released with the report, Rep. John E. Moss, (D-Sacramento) chief author of the law, said: "The importance of freedom of information is greater than ever today in light of the steady erosion of our Constitution by the execu-

attitude in support of 'open access' from the top administrative officials . . ."

The committee recommended legislation to impose time limits intended to speed bureaucratic response to requests for information.

utive branch under all of the war-time administration of both major political parties. This ominous trend must be reversed.

"A democracy without a free and truthful flow of information from government to its people is nothing more than an elected dictatorship. We can never permit this to happen in America."

### Law Since 1966

Signed into law July 4, 1966, the Freedom of Information Act was designed to make all government records and information available to the public unless the material fit into nine specific categories.

The exemptions were for information the President ordered kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy; internal personnel files and practices; matters kept secret by law; trade secrets; internal memoranda; personnel and medical files; investigatory law enforcement files; reports prepared for agencies responsible for regulating financial institutions; and geological and geophysical data concerning wells.

The committee said the provisions allowing withholding of information—intended to safeguard vital defense secrets, personal privacy, trade secrets and the like — "have been misused" by federal agencies.

"The desire to withhold

records which might embarrass an agency" has played a part in the lingering secrecy, the committee said.

It urged "a more positive