

Flood of Requests For 'Secret' Files

Washington

More than 800 persons have written to the FBI, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Internal Revenue Service in the last month, swamping those agencies — often identified with domestic intelligence operations — with requests for information that was once locked in secret files.

Most of them, according to officials who have watched the letters come in, want to know if the government has been keeping a file on them and what's in it.

The FBI, a spokesman said, opens a file on each letter writer, if a file does not exist, after independent-

ly checking the writer's identity.

The spokesman said the new files were opened to keep a record of the bureau's action in response to letter requests, and the check is made to ensure that one person's file does not go to someone else with the same name.

In the first month's test of the amendments made last year to the Freedom of Information Act, letter requests are running at double last year's rate at the IRS and at more than double the rate at the FBI. At the CIA, a spokesman said, 383 requests were received from February 20 to March 19. Ninety-six requests had been

received there in all of January and half of February.

"We have spent 80 per cent of our time on that since February 19," a CIA official said, apparently only partly in jest.

The reason behind the flood of new letters seeking from personal files to voluminous policy studies is the amended Freedom of Information Act, which came into effect on February 19. The amendments, passed by an overwhelming margin over President Ford's veto last November, severely limited the bureaucracy's ability to dodge requests for information that is legally supposed to be available to the public.

As the amendments came into effect, new offices here opened all over Washington to handle the flood of freedom of information requests. At CIA headquarters, a spokesman said, 35 people have been set to work full-time handling requests where a few worked part-time before.

Six persons now work full-time at the IRS, handling freedom of information requests within the service's disclosure division.

The staff of the FBI's Freedom of Information Act unit has been tripled since 1973. James Farrington, speaking for the unit, said that because 209 letters have arrived in March alone, they have fallen behind the 10 days allowed by the act to answer requests.

"Prior to this onslaught, we could handle the requests within the time limits," Farrington said.

Farrington said the FBI, faces serious problems complying with the amended act's requirement that investigatory files be disclosed without revealing confidential sources of information in them. That exception was written into one of last year's amendments to the original Freedom of Information Act, which has been on the books since 1967.

Although agencies have been responding quickly, only a trickle of new information has come out in the first month of the new rules. Bureaucrats handling requests seemed clearly aware that one of the amendments to the Freedom of Information Act specifically made court proceedings and sanctions for unwilling officials possible.

"I have a little litany now: thou shalt not be arbitrary or capricious," said one government spokesman. "That's the wording of the act."

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