

Access Denied

FEDERAL WEBSITE GOVERNANCE
UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Access Denied: Federal Web Governance Under the Trump Administration

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The Environmental Data & Governance Initiative (EDGI) is an organization comprised of academics and non-profit employees, as well as caring and committed volunteers who come from a broad spectrum of work and life backgrounds. EDGI promotes open and accessible government data and information along with evidence-based policy making.



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Executive Summary

The Trump administration pushed the boundaries of rules, guidelines, and norms in most areas of governance. Manipulating public information was a key tactic, which included dramatic and damaging changes to federal agency websites relating to environmental regulations. These changes led the [Environmental Data and Governance Initiative](#) (EDGI) to identify acute gaps in federal website governance and develop recommendations for reforms under the Biden administration and beyond.

Websites are the [primary means by which federal environmental agencies communicate with the public](#) and serve as resources paid for by American tax dollars to benefit the public. Changes to language, content, or access to federal websites can directly affect public knowledge of and participation in environmental decision-making. While considerable guidance exists for the [delivery of federal digital services](#), there is scant policy focused on the web content provided by federal agencies, and born-digital resources are by and large excluded from record-keeping laws. There are no repercussions, for example, for agencies stripping websites that contain inconvenient factual information for a given political agenda.

In this digital age and at this juncture in the development and protection of American democracy, EDGI recommends that the Biden administration swiftly develop progressive web-based information policies to be implemented across federal agencies and then codified into law. These policies and laws would provide standards for **web governance**, that is, the creation and management of data and informational resources provided on digital platforms. We recommend that regulatory-related resources—informational resources that pertain to the purpose, function, or impact of environmental laws—be a web governance priority.

Key Findings

We examined the Trump administration's governance of web resources related to regulations by categorizing changes to federal websites throughout his term. Of the approximately [1,400 changes to federal environmental websites catalogued by EDGI's Website Monitoring Team](#) since January 2017, over 20% (294) of the changes were directly related to regulations.

Half (50%) of the website changes related to regulations were outright removals of information, 10% were reductions in navigability, 15% were language changes, and 25% were additions of information. The majority of information removals provided context for regulations and most were resources geared toward specific non-expert audiences, like fact sheets and guidance documents.

The timing of website changes is critical to understanding their potential impact. In this study, 80% of the information removals we observed occurred just prior to or during active regulatory proceedings. The implications are sobering: Federal agencies with vested interests in certain regulatory outcomes can deprive the public of resources that inform their understanding of and facilitate their involvement with regulations.

We observed substantive changes to websites related to the following regulations, among others:

- Clean Water Rule (pages 5-8)
- Clean Power Plan (pages 15-16)
- Greater Sage Grouse Resource Management Plans (pages 16, 22)
- Migratory Bird Treaty Act (page 19-20)

Recommendations

EDGI recommends the Biden administration develop information policies to address the web governance failures we observed during the Trump administration. More detailed recommendations are provided in the full report, but the overarching recommendations include:

1. Commit to the importance of web governance by **developing and maintaining digital policies and procedures that focus on website structure, content, and access**, with special attention to regulatory-related resources.
2. **Create meaningful resources to expand civic and scientific literacy.** Create more comprehensive resources that implement **ladders of information** geared toward audiences with a variety of background knowledge, from novice to expert, such that the public can build their environmental and science literacy through engaging with federal websites. Further, require websites to provide the scientific basis for regulations.
3. **Ensure resource accessibility.** Website information should be **available, discoverable, and navigable.** Information about upcoming regulatory matters should be widely posted on all webpages with relevant subject matter such that the

public is made aware of opportunities for civic engagement and participation in environmental decision-making.

4. **Preserve public web resources.** Archive web content in an accessible way, including by providing links to archived webpages from existing and preexisting URLs. Establish **specific notice and explanation requirements** for any resource removals, and develop a searchable **database that describes changes on webpages.**

At this pivotal historic moment, the public deserves durable information policies that restore and advance faith in federal institutions and democratic processes at every level. The public must know that the information they read on federal websites is accurate and is not bent or blocked to serve political agendas. Better web governance practices can assist the federal government in regaining and retaining public trust.

Introduction

The Trump administration pushed the boundaries of rules, guidelines, and norms in most areas of governance. Manipulating public information was a key tactic of the Trump administration, from using a personal social media account for policy announcements to promoting misinformation and disinformation on topics ranging from Hurricane Dorian to the 2020 presidential election results. As the Trump administration reshaped government norms, it made dramatic and damaging changes to federal agency websites, including those relating to environmental regulations. These changes led the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI) to identify acute gaps in federal agency website governance, and develop recommendations to improve it under the Biden administration and beyond.

Failing to provide complete and accurate information about policies that affect our lives prevents the public from advocating for, participating in the development of, or holding the government accountable for those policies, clearly undermining democracy. In the 21st century, that information is delivered [primarily through agency websites](#). Websites about laws and regulations are foundational to our federal decision-making processes. Governance of those web resources mediates real-world policies, with tangible impacts for people and the environment.

The creation and management of data, text, visuals, and other information provided on digital platforms can be called *web governance*. Web governance of informational resources that pertain to the purpose, function, impact, or effectiveness of a law, rule, or regulation, what we term *regulatory-related resources*, is particularly critical. The information provided on agency websites substantially influences the public's ability to understand and evaluate environmental rules and regulations. The comprehensiveness and accessibility of that information either supports or undermines the integrity of notice-and-comment rulemaking.

There are very few requirements regarding the content of the information provided by agencies through their websites (see Appendix A for more information about existing guidelines). There are two guidance documents from the Office of Management and Budget that agencies are supposed to follow with respect to information management, [Circular A-130 \(most recently revised in 2016\) "Managing Information as a Strategic Resource"](#), and [M-17-06 \(2016\) "Policies for Federal Agency Public Websites and Digital Services."](#) These guidance documents largely focus on infrastructural rather than content

or contextual information requirements, with one section of M-17-06 describing mandatory content—namely, links to privacy and transparency policies and laws. The Information Quality Act (see [OMB guidance regarding this law](#)) requires agencies to maximize “the quality, utility, objectivity and integrity of the information that they disseminate,” but does not stipulate the kinds of information they must disseminate. Agencies are required through different laws, namely the [National Environmental Policy Act](#) and the [Administrative Procedure Act](#), to notify the public about proposed rules and to provide basic information about a few key issues, such as whether or not a proposed rule is likely to have a disproportionate impact on low-income, minority communities. However, these notices must be provided only through publication in the Federal Register, with very few rules or guidelines regarding the information agencies share through their websites. These represent substantial gaps in information policy since it is [recognized that federal agency websites are the main conduit](#) for information from agencies to the public.

Several agencies consider public information critical to their ability to achieve their mission. For example, the EPA’s mission is to [protect human health and the environment](#). It lists six key activities the agency does to accomplish its mission, one of which is to “Teach people about the environment,” and another to “Publish information” on its website and other written materials. These efforts are to ensure that, “All parts of society—communities, individuals, businesses, and state, local and tribal governments—have access to accurate information sufficient to effectively participate in managing human health and environmental risks.”

The Trump administration’s removal and reorganization of information on agency webpages directly undermines those professed aims. The treatment of information related to the 2015 rule regarding the definition of Waters of the United States is one example of how the Trump administration inappropriately managed web resources to erode public access.

Case Study: Waters of the United States

The definition of the Waters of the United States (WOTUS), those waters which can be regulated under the authority of the Clean Water Act, has had several revisions over the last 50 years. Until last year, each new WOTUS definition had been more encompassing than the previous version. The Trump administration not only narrowed the WOTUS definition for the first time since the Clean Water Act was passed, but also deprived the public of vital information about that change. As this case study will show, the EPA failed to

provide public information on its website regarding the underlying science supporting existing or proposed WOTUS definitions or potential impacts of rescinding existing protections, severely inhibiting public participation in this critical environmental decision-making.

In 2015, under pressure from environmentalists advocating for better water quality protection and agricultural and industrial groups demanding regulatory clarity, the Obama administration promulgated a revised definition of the Waters of the United States, known as the Clean Water Rule. In March 2014, a month prior to the [initiation of a 90-day comment period](#) for the proposed Clean Water Rule, the EPA launched a website, "[US Waters](#)." This website described the purpose of the proposed rule, what the proposed rule would and would not do, its scientific underpinnings, and its likely environmental impacts. This website remained live throughout the EPA rulemaking process until February 2015 when [it began redirecting](#) users to a new website with the same information, the "[Clean Water Rule](#)" website. This website featured information for a range of audiences, with introductory material about aquatic ecosystems, infographics, fact sheets for a variety of stakeholders, summaries and links to research on which the rule was based, and direct comparisons about which water bodies are protected under different interpretations of waters of the United States. The final Clean Water Rule was [published in the Federal Register](#) in June 2015. EPA's Clean Water Rule website persisted throughout the rest of the Obama administration and into the first few months of the Trump administration.

As one of the first major strikes of his deregulatory agenda, on February 28, 2017, President Trump signed [an executive order](#) requesting the EPA to review (and potentially rescind) the Clean Water Rule. The [EPA immediately signaled it would comply](#) with the request, and on March 6, 2017 filed a [notice of intent](#) to review the rule. While the EPA was in the process of reviewing the rule, to inform either a proposal to revise or rescind the rule, it removed the majority of the agency's public information regarding the Clean Water Rule. As detailed in [EDGI's report](#), on May 15, 2017, the entire [Clean Water Rule website](#) began redirecting to a new "[Waters of the United States Rule](#)," or WOTUS Rule, website. The WOTUS Rule website consisted of just four webpages: the landing page, "About the Waters of the United States," "Rulemaking Process," and "Frequently Asked Questions." A detailed discussion of the contents of this website can be found in EDGI's public comment, "[EPA Must Provide More Accessible and Informative Resources for Authentic Public Comment](#)." The WOTUS Rule website focused almost entirely on the rulemaking process, especially the process of reviewing, repealing, and then replacing the Clean Water Rule. There was no information on the website that pointed to a scientific reasoning for the review or its

revision or repeal. There was no information on the website about the hydrologic or ecosystem differences between the 2015 rule and former versions of the rule, and no information on the website about what exactly the 2015 rule did or did not include in its protections.

This transition from the information-rich Clean Water Rule website to the WOTUS Rule website occurred more than ten weeks before the EPA [officially proposed to repeal the Clean Water Rule](#) on July 27, 2017, and more than two years before the [EPA finalized the repeal](#) on October 22, 2019. Through three public comment periods between 2017 and 2019, the EPA failed to provide public information on its website regarding the science behind the 2015 version or any prior definitions of the Waters of the United States, any potential impacts of rescinding the 2015 protections, or even a direct comparison of the types of waters included in the 2015 rule versus other rules. The public's ability to participate in the rulemaking process, as is mandated by the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), was impeded by the orchestrated reduction in public information delivered by the EPA.



Figure 1. Homepage of the Clean Water Rule website (left) the day before it began redirecting to the homepage of the Waters of the United States Rule website (right) in May 2017.

The removal of public access to resources about Waters of the United States is a striking example of harmful website governance yet is one of many that occurred during the Trump administration. We observed and documented hundreds of cases of resource removals, navigation barriers, and language changes, as well as several cases of additions of information about regulatory proceedings or regulatory subject matter. This report explores patterns in the management of federal websites regarding environmental regulations under the Trump administration.

Methods

EDGI's Website Monitoring Team has been tracking changes to federal agency websites related to climate, energy, and the environment since January 2017. To compile the list of webpages to monitor, first a small team within EDGI identified "seed pages," from which software would automatically crawl, adding each linked page from the seed page, and each linked page from each linked page, for several steps. The public was invited to suggest additional pages as well. By mid-2017, the database of pages was approximately 25,000 URLs and grew to 40,000 URLs by mid-2018. The vast majority of the webpages in the database existed under the Obama administration; newly created webpages were not systematically added to the monitoring database. The database spans thirteen federal agencies, with the largest number of webpages from the EPA, DOE, NASA, and NOAA websites.

EDGI's Website Monitoring Team built software that identifies changes between two versions of the same webpage, and analysts on the team manually review changes on a weekly basis. It is not feasible to manually review changes to all 40,000 webpages each week, so the team selects certain domains of interest to track closely. The monitoring of those domains has varied along with team capacity, usually ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 URLs, with priority given to EPA webpages. Analysts catalogue each webpage change they review that is determined to be a substantive change. Each of these substantive changes is compiled into [a public dataset of important changes](#). This dataset, with approximately 1,400 entries as of January 2021, is not a comprehensive tabulation of meaningful changes that occurred across federal environmental websites during the Trump administration, and the variability of the database monitoring by analysts impedes our ability to make statistically sound quantitative assertions about changes to the federal web space at large. However, we can thoroughly describe observations made in our sample, which is a substantial portion of the federal environmental web presence. EDGI's public dataset is the largest, broadest, and most detailed documentation of changes to federal government websites.

We identified 294 webpage changes in this public dataset that pertained to regulatory matters. We searched the dataset for terms related to regulations and subject matter most closely linked with environmental rules and deregulatory actions made during the Trump administration (see Appendix B for a complete list of terms used). Each of the webpage changes identified by querying the dataset for those terms was reviewed to ensure its relevance to environmental regulatory issues. We restricted webpages in our sample to

those that could be directly related to regulatory matters. For example, the EPA's removal of its Clean Power Plan website was included in our sample, but the removal of its Climate Change website, which would be valuable context for the Clean Power Plan rule but also contained much broader information not directly pertaining to the rule, was not.

The regulatory-related webpage changes were then inductively themed. Four primary categories of themes emerged: removals of information, reduction in navigability, language changes, and additions of information. Each of the 294 entries were assigned only one theme, and thus only one category. If the change had elements of multiple themes, the theme that best represented the change was selected. Within removals of information, we identified removals of relevant subject matter information, including information geared for broad audiences, such as fact sheets, and removals of regulatory history. Within language changes, we identified both general wording changes and those with an overt political spin. Within additions of information, we identified additions of information about regulatory proceedings, updates to reflect new policies, and additions of subject matter information, including those geared toward broad audiences. For a full list of themes identified, see Table 1. While our sample is not comprehensive due to the challenges of manually monitoring at the scale of the federal government, the analyses we present in this report offer the most thorough portrayal of changes to website information about the laws and regulations that impact our environment and our lives.

How the Trump Administration Changed Regulatory Resources: Results and Discussion

Of the approximately 1,400 important web changes cataloged in EDGI's website monitoring dataset, 294 of them were related to regulations and regulatory affairs. Half of those changes (50%) were **removals** of information, 10% were **navigation impairments** that reduce access to information, 15% were **language changes**, and 25% were **additions** of information (Figure 2). Table 1 lists the array of themes identified, separated into these four main categories and the agencies where the web changes occurred. Eleven agencies are represented in these website changes, though the patterns identified are largely driven by EPA pages, which account for 66% of our sample.

In tracking changes, EDGI identified a theme of deletions and restrictions occurring prior to or during regulatory proceedings. Over 80% of the subject matter removals we observed occurred while proposed rules were being actively developed or, as in the case of the Clean Water Rule, while existing rules were still in effect prior to a formal repeal. The implications are sobering: federal agencies with vested interests in certain regulatory outcomes can deprive the public of resources that inform their understanding of and facilitate their involvement with regulations. The reduced information can prevent the public from meaningfully participating in the rulemaking process via public comments, or engaging elected representatives, local and regional agencies, or even news outlets. The majority of the impediments to navigation, language changes, and information additions we observed were made during regulatory proceedings as well, again underscoring that rigorous website management is crucial to ensuring the integrity of regulatory policy and process.

In this section, we will describe the four categories and eight themes inductively identified in our analysis, and will provide detailed examples to further demonstrate each theme.

Table 1. Web governance themes identified

Category	Theme	Count of pages (percentage)	Agencies (count of pages)
Removals of Information (146, 50%)	Removal of guides, fact sheets, or other supports	59 (20%)	EPA (34), BLM (20), USDA (2), BOEM (1), DOI (1), FWS (1)
	Removal of subject matter information (not in the form of a fact sheet or guide)	57 (19%)	EPA (35), BLM (8), FWS (8), BOEM (2), NIEHS (2), DOE (1), EIA (1)
	Removal of regulatory history	30 (10%)	EPA (25), DOI (2), OSMRE (2), DOT (1)
Navigation Impairments (30, 10%)	Isolating data or information	30 (10%)	EPA (24), BLM (2), DOE (1), DOI (1), FWS (1), OSMRE (1)
Language Changes (44, 15%)	Language to favor regulated industries	10 (3%)	EPA (8), GAO (1), OSMRE (1)
	Language changes to alter public perception	34 (12%)	EPA (24), EIA (5), BLM (3), DOI (2)
Additions of Information (74, 25%)	Addition of information about rules	55 (19%)	EPA (37), FWS (9), DOI (3), OSMRE (3), BLM (2), BOEM (1)
	Addition of other relevant information	19 (6%)	EPA (9), BLM (7), BOEM (2), FWS (1)

Web Governance Categories

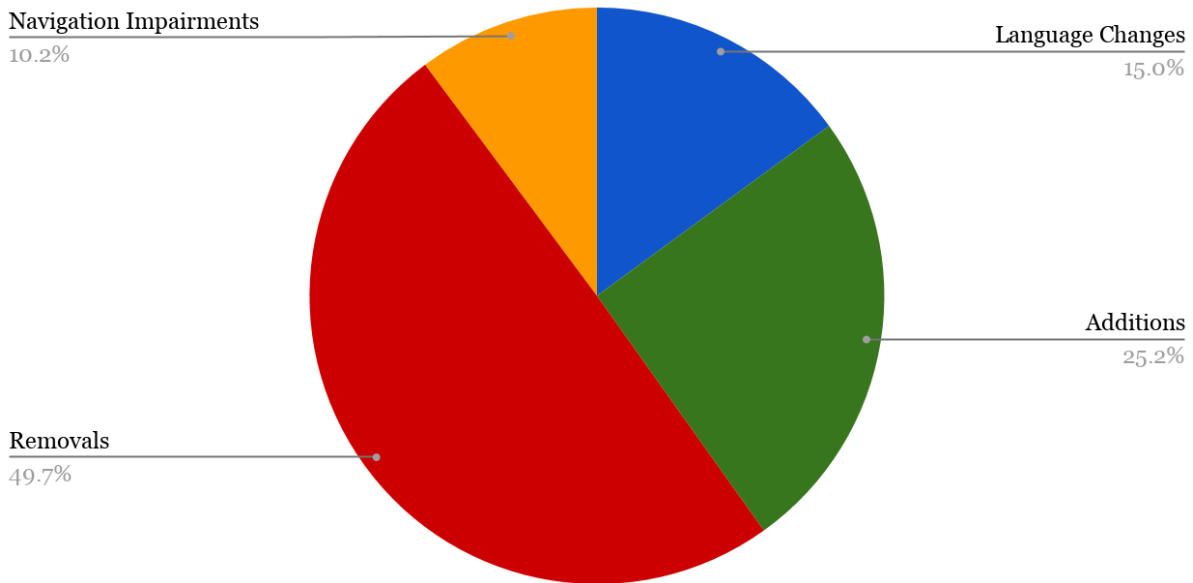


Figure 2. Distribution of the categories of federal web governance actions observed for public resources related to regulations 2017 - 2020.

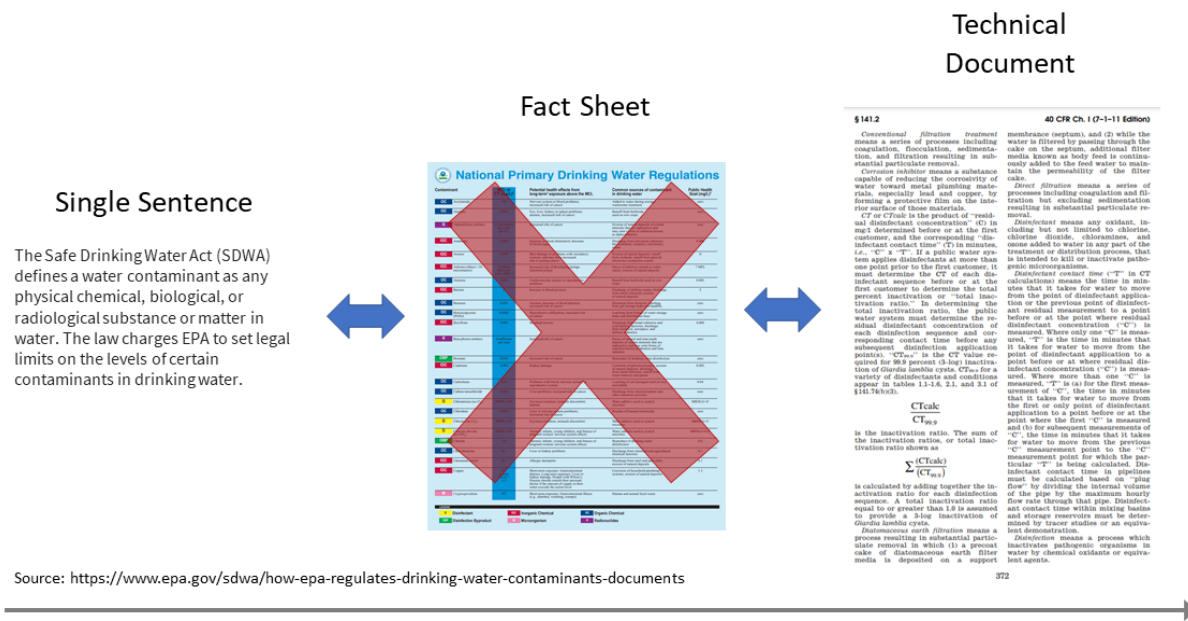
Removal of Information

Half of the changes to regulatory-related web resources we observed were outright removals of information, including the removal of relevant subject matter such as scientific evidence in support of a regulation or information about regulations themselves. It is worth noting that there is currently no mechanism by which the public can request the restoration of these resources or the creation of additional ones; they have simply been removed without consequence to the agencies.

Removal of Relevant Subject Matter Information

The majority of regulatory-related information removals we observed (116 of 146 removals) were of subject matter information directly relevant to regulatory proceedings, including 59 instances of the removal of web resources explicitly geared toward a broad, non-expert audience, such as fact sheets, guides, brochures, and other supporting resources. While there were information removals without a clear precipitating activity (such as a proposed rule), at least 96 of the 116 subject matter information removals we observed occurred just prior to or during active regulatory proceedings.

Removals of fact sheets, guides, brochures, and other types of information geared toward non-expert audiences are particularly damaging, as they obstruct knowledge-acquisition trajectories, as illustrated in Figure 3. Agencies and academics alike have long struggled with science communication, [even in spite of the environmental right to know movement spurred by the Bhopal disaster](#) more than 30 years ago. In the intervening years, the field of science communication has blossomed due to widespread recognition that public understanding of science is critically important, including [for public safety](#) and [for democracy](#). Materials like fact sheets that are aimed toward different lay audiences—focused on the delivery of specific information and often using graphics and other visuals in addition to text—are [essential components of effective science communication](#). Removing these resources before asking the public to weigh in on environmental decisions is directly at odds with communication norms and with the federal government’s own [plain language requirements and recommendations](#). Removals are notable impediments to the democratic process of environmental decision-making.



Federal Website Information Acquisition

Figure 3. Depiction of how removals of fact sheets and other intermediate-level information interrupt the knowledge acquisition trajectory. Text and images in this figure are from the [“How EPA Regulates Drinking Water Contaminants Documents”](#) webpage, from which the [“National Drinking Water Regulations Booklet”](#) was removed in September 2017.

There was a pattern across federal agencies to remove public information, including fact sheets and more detailed information, in advance of proceedings to repeal high-visibility

regulations. The potential damage of this sort of web governance can be best demonstrated by actual examples from our sample, including those described below. The timeline of information removal and public comment opportunities for four of these rules are shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Timeline demonstrating the removal of public web resources in advance of public comment periods for: the repeal of the Clean Water Rule (EPA) (blue), the repeal of the Clean Power Plan (EPA) (red), deregulatory amendments to Sage Grouse Resource Management Plans (BLM) (green), and codifying the allowance of incidental take of migratory birds (FWS) (beige).

Example: Removal of Clean Power Plan Resources

In April 2017, more than five months before it would propose to repeal the Clean Power Plan (CPP), the EPA redirected its entire [Clean Power Plan website](#) to a single new webpage, [Energy Independence](#). This action [severely limited public access to information that was essential](#) for understanding the CPP, the feasibility of its implementation, and its potential impact on climate change mitigation. The CPP website had included information about the environmental and climate impacts of carbon dioxide; how the CPP would address carbon dioxide emissions from their single largest source, power plants; technical guidance about

reducing emissions at both the plant- and grid-level; fact sheets for audiences ranging from impacted communities to regulated entities; and more. The Energy Independence webpage, however, only included information about EPA's compliance with President Trump's executive order 13783, "[Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth](#)," and nothing about the CPP itself. The removal of myriad public resources from the EPA website months in advance of the public comment period was a clear and overt attack on democratic participation in the decision to repeal the Clean Power Plan.

Example: Removal of Sage Grouse Informational Resources

In addition to broad swaths of information being removed from agency websites, such as happened with Clean Water Rule and Clean Power Plan resources, there have also been targeted removals of specific information related to regulations. In 2018 the BLM [removed several pieces of specific information](#) during regulatory proceedings regarding the Greater Sage Grouse Resource Management Plans. While several webpages remained online regarding the Greater Sage Grouse, in the days leading up to the release of draft amendments and the opening of a public comment period in May 2018, some of the most accessible resources geared toward the general public were removed: the [Top 5 Things You Should Know About Greater Sage-Grouse webpage](#) and fact sheets about each states' current sage grouse conservation efforts (e.g. [Nevada](#)). The webpages that had hosted those fact sheets were then removed after the end of the public comment period in August 2018, but months before the last public protest period or the finalization of the amendments. Additionally, the webpage describing one of the most critical features of the original plans, and the amendments to them—the "[Sagebrush Focal Area Withdrawal](#)" webpage—was first purged of useful information just prior to the public comment period in May 2018, and then was completely removed in June 2018, in the middle of the public comment period. The removal of these resources robbed the public of vital context for evaluating the proposed amendments, which diminished the role of the federal government in helping conserve the Greater Sage Grouse.

Removal of Information With Disproportionate Impacts

Federal environmental website information removals inherently have a disproportionate impact on low-income and minority communities by virtue of the fact that environmental problems themselves have a disproportionate impact on those communities. There are also notable instances where web governance practices specifically target resources designed for marginalized groups. For example, while the English language "Clean Water Rule" webpages were archived by the EPA when their URLs began redirecting to the

WOTUS-Rule website, [the Spanish language versions of those Clean Water Rule pages were not](#) (see a version of the [Norma de Agua Limpia](#) webpage saved to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine). Spanish language guides and forms were also removed from public access while the English language counterparts were not. When EPA's webpage for reporting environmental violations was transferred to a new URL in March 2018, the Spanish language form for reporting violations was left off of the new page (along with substantial information about whistleblower protections; compare [before](#) and [after](#)). In June 2018, the link to "Guías de cumplimiento sobre las normas de emisiones de formaldehído provenientes de productos de madera compuesta" (Compliance guidelines on formaldehyde emission standards from composite wood products) was removed from the Spanish language Environmental Issues page, "Temas Ambientales" (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). These unequal treatments of English language and Spanish language resources, be they oversight errors or intentional xenophobic actions, disenfranchise Spanish-speaking individuals and communities and pave the way for more environmental injustices.

Removal of Regulatory History

In addition to removals of subject matter information, we observed 30 instances of the removal of regulatory history, which accounts for a full 10% of our overall sample. The removal of information about the history of regulations, including former versions of rules and impediments to current rules, erases important context for the public, lawmakers, and industries to understand the regulatory landscape, its implementation, and its effectiveness.

Example: Removal of Regulatory History on EPA's Unconventional Oil and Gas Effluent Extractions Guidelines Webpage

Between July 1 and July 5, 2019, the EPA removed [information from its Unconventional Oil and Gas Extraction \(UOG\) Effluent Guidelines webpage](#). This information was relevant to UOG extraction wastewater management and the enforcement of a final rule prohibiting the discharge of UOG extraction wastewater into publicly owned treatment works (POTWs) (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). This is an important rule for protecting surface waters from hydraulic fracturing waste, but the removal of information regarding the history of the rule makes it more challenging for the public to understand its importance, or recognize the due diligence EPA did in researching the feasibility of implementing the rule. The webpage still provides some environmental background, including the general kinds of chemicals found in UOG extraction wastewater, along with a handful of problems associated with the

practice of sending UOG extraction wastewater to POTWs. However, it no longer contains information about how extraction wastewater is produced or how that wastewater is characterized and classified, both of which represent baseline information for understanding industry compliance with the rule. The webpage also no longer specifies that, as of 2016 when the new rule was initially promulgated, most UOG operations did not discharge wastewater into POTWs, nor does it specify the impetus for the rule as the concern that UOG operations may discharge extraction wastewater to POTWs again in the future. Without such information, the purpose and implications of the effluent guidelines and recent regulatory actions are not apparent.

Navigation: Impairments to Reaching Resources

Online information should be not only available, but discoverable through both search and website navigation. In 10% of our sample (30 of 294 entries), resources were made more difficult to find. The resources that we deemed were harder to find were still technically discoverable, especially if a person had prior knowledge of its existence, but the public's ability to navigate to that resource from a related page had been reduced, mostly by removing links to pertinent information. While less drastic than outright removal, reducing access to resources can impede public understanding of issues by disrupting visible relationships between subjects (e.g. by removing links to related topics) or inhibiting access to further information about a given subject. Too often these are implemented on landing pages where users often look to provide entry into specific information.

We found several examples of links removed from pages that operate as a collection of resources for a given issue, thereby occluding the relationship between those resources that were no longer linked and the subject matter of the collection. For example, in March 2017, the EPA removed the link to the [National-scale Air Toxics Assessment \(NATA\)](#) from its "Risk Assessment Tools and Databases" catalogue (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). A person searching for databases about risks to human health would no longer be prompted to examine the assessment, which is the only resource to provide estimates of ambient toxic emissions and exposures in the US. Also in March 2017, the EPA removed six of the nine kinds of regulations listed on its "Regulations to Reduce Mobile Source Pollution" webpage (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). While the removed regulations are still discoverable, they are no longer listed on this webpage that serves as a primary portal into learning about the variety of regulations in service of reducing pollution from mobile sources like cars, trucks, airplanes, and ships. As shown in Figure 5, in February 2018, the FWS removed the listing and link to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act from its Energy Development webpage "Permits,

Policies, and Authorities” (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). With the removal of this listing, a web visitor may not know that the [Migratory Bird Treaty Act](#) has been a key tool for enforcing and improving energy industry environmental safety practices.

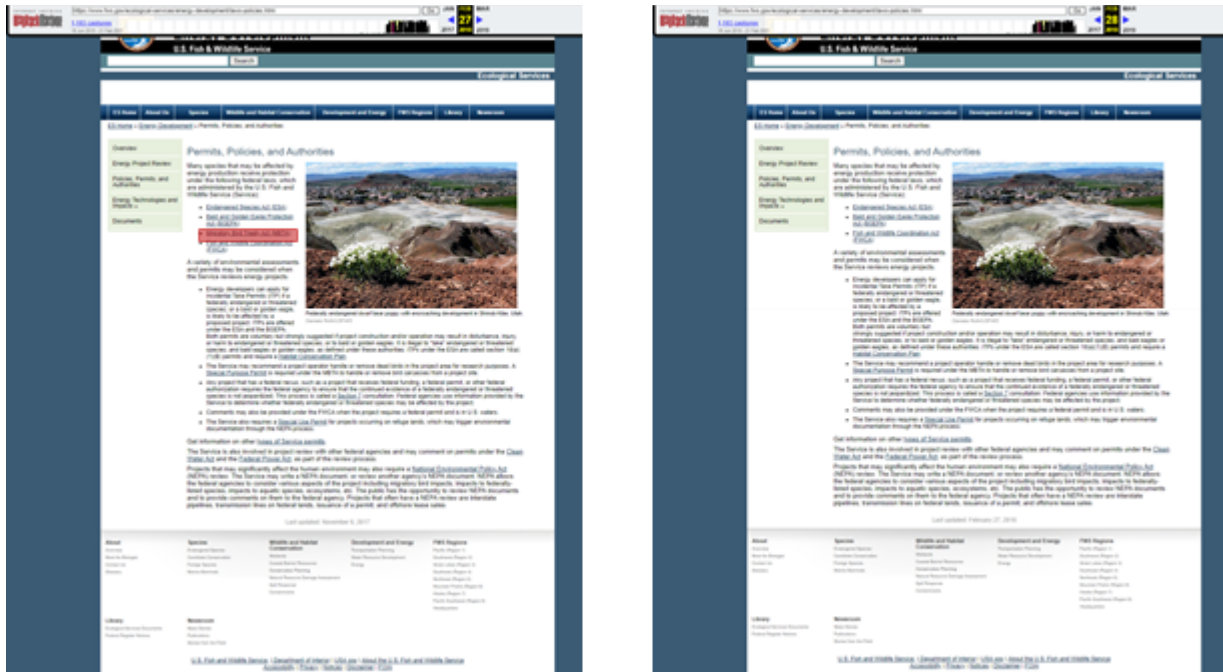


Figure 5. On FWS’ “Permits, Policies, and Authorities” webpage in its Energy Development subdomain, the link to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was removed. The image on the left shows the page on February 27, 2018 with the link removed highlighted in red. The image on the right shows the page on February 28, 2018.

In addition to links to resources being deleted from central landing pages, these central landing pages were themselves sometimes removed while all of the linked pages remained live. For example, the primary landing pages for environmental information in multiple states were removed for approximately two months, making the substantive information that had been collected there more difficult to find (see below).

Example: Removal of Access to EPA’s Environmental Information for Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia pages (Region 3) between October 13 and December 9, 2020.

EPA maintains ten regional offices across the country, each responsible for EPA activities in multiple adjoining states and, in some cases, territories or special environmental programs. While there are some variations, EPA maintains a site for each state, titled: “EPA Environmental Information for [state name].” These pages are typically comprised of a multitude of links divided along program lines (e.g., air, water, hazardous waste cleanup) and with links related to the state and region. A substantial number of links take the user to

regulatory information, including the Mercury and Air Toxic Standards, Water Quality Standards, and various environmental compliance dashboards for the state. Between October 13 and December 9, 2020, these pages were not accessible for Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, which comprise four of the six states/territories under EPA Region 3. For almost two months, a user who looked up, e.g., environmental information for Delaware was taken to this site: <https://www.epa.gov/de/environmental-information-delaware>, and was greeted with a “[Sorry, but this page is not available for viewing right now.](#)” The page returned on [December 10th](#), looking the same, and with apparently all the same information that was included on [October 12th](#). A similar pattern was found for the Environmental Information pages for Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia over the same time period. It is worth noting that during the two month period, there were public comment periods, compliance issues, and, of course, a presidential election in which the candidates’ climate and environmental platforms differed significantly and Pennsylvania was considered a critical swing state.

Language Changes

Determining the content of resources, including the terminology used to describe issues, policies, and more is obviously a critical component of web governance. There were notable language changes in 15% of our sample (44 of 294 examples) that could influence the public’s perception of an issue or understanding of the purpose or effectiveness of a regulation.

Language to Favor Regulated Industries

Some of the language changes (10 of the 44 instances) placed overt pro-industry spin on subject matter. While EDGI observed language alterations that favored regulated industries in many web changes outside of the sample of interest in this report, it is notable that these types of language changes comprised a fairly small portion of the regulatory-related resource changes (3%). These changes were significant, however, as the examples below illustrate.

Example: National Enforcement Initiative: Keeping Industrial Pollutants Out of the Nation’s Waters

In August 2018, [the EPA announced](#) that its “National Enforcement Initiatives” would be renamed “National Compliance Initiatives.” This name change ostensibly was to reflect that

the ultimate goal of the initiatives was to bring facilities into compliance by using other strategies in addition to enforcement. However, other language changes on webpages describing the initiatives suggest a cultural shift as well. For example, over the course of a couple of webpage revisions, between February and September 2018, the webpage “Keeping Industrial Pollutants Out of the Nation’s Waters” had three language changes that substantially altered the page, removing references to polluting industries or EPA’s duty to enforce environmental regulations (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). The “Problem” section was rewritten from a sentence focused on the industries of concern, to then exclude reference to the industries or any source of the pollution and focus instead only on the fact that nutrient and metal pollution in lakes and streams exists. The “Goal” section was also entirely rewritten. This section shifted from the EPA’s focus on bringing specific industries into better compliance and a need to “cut illegal pollution discharges” to a sentence about surface water quality and “assuring that dischargers are complying with their permit limits and conditions.” Two additional sections were added to the page: one about “progress” toward addressing industrial dischargers and a second about the shift to “compliance” initiatives. The discussion of industrial dischargers only included information from the current fiscal year and had no data pertaining to previous years for comparison. The new compliance initiative section represented a narrowed focus to simply reduce the percentage of facilities in “[significant non-compliance](#).” The word “enforcement” was no longer included in the body of the webpage at all, and enforcement actions were not described as tools the EPA would use to bring facilities into compliance. It is worth noting that [EPA enforcement actions did indeed plummet](#) under the Trump administration.

Example: Agricultural Worker Protection Standard

Between June 14 and June 15, 2018, the EPA made updates to its “[Agricultural Worker Protection Standard \(WPS\)](#)” webpage (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). Some further explanation was given to the requirements, including the addition of a link to training materials, which enhances the utility of the webpage. However, there were two changes that substantially altered the tone of the webpage and the purpose of this standard. A sentence describing 2015 revisions to the rule had stated that the revisions implemented “stronger protections” for workers and was altered to state that the revisions implemented “more protections” for workers. The following sentence had read, “Each year, between 1,800 and 3,000 preventable occupational incidents involving pesticide exposure occur on establishments covered by the WPS,” but that entire sentence was removed. Combined, these two changes downplay the importance of the WPS and the 2015 revisions that strengthened it. In this case, an interest in protecting agricultural workers via the WPS would be much more credible if the webpage contained data on occupational incidents over time and described

aggressive and transparent targets towards reducing the frequency and severity of these incidents. We hope that this type of transparent, evidence-based information and context will be provided in future updates to this and other pages.

Language Changes to Alter Public Perceptions and Expectations

Most of the language changes we observed (34 of 44 examples) were not overtly pro-industry, but would likely influence public expectations or perceptions of an issue, perhaps in ways that benefit industry. For example, on BLM's webpage about implementing Sage Grouse conservation and management plans, the description of one of the three main approaches for maintaining Sage Grouse habitat had read, "Protecting intact habitat by capping the amount of disturbance on these lands and establishing buffers around the bird's breeding grounds." In December 2018, as the Sage Grouse management plans were under active revision, the sentence was changed to simply say, "Protecting intact habitat by managing disturbance to these lands" (more detail is provided in [our 2019 report](#), pp 30-32). It is substantively distinct to say "capping" versus "managing," and the concept of establishing buffers is critically important to the conservation of the species. These are not insignificant language changes.

Other examples of language changes would be likely to affect public perceptions more by altering the tone of the webpage or a given issue. For example, in February 2017 on the Energy Information Administration's webpage for "Oil and Petroleum Products Explained," several changes were made including a sentence that was changed from "there are environmental concerns associated with hydraulic fracturing" to "hydraulic fracturing has some effects on the environment" (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). As shown in Figure 6, in November 2018, on EPA's page about the registration of the pesticide Dicamba, the title of the page and descriptors within the page were changed from "genetically engineered crops" to "Dicamba-Tolerant crops." The link to "[Understanding the Science Behind EPA's Pesticide Decisions](#)" was removed at the same time (compare [before](#) and [after](#)).

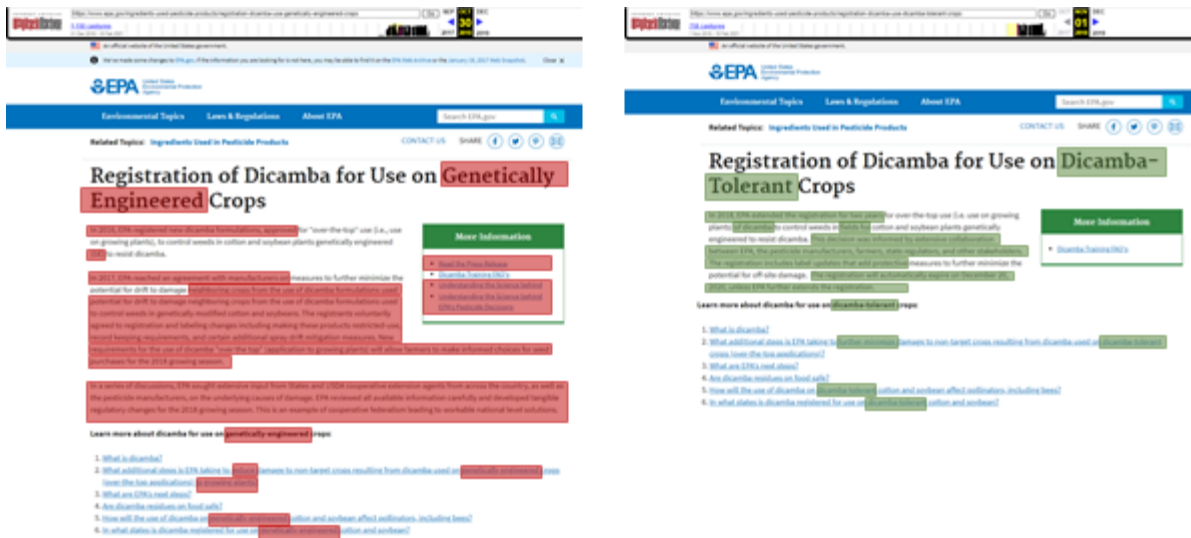


Figure 6. On EPA’s “Registration of Dicamba for Use on Genetically Engineered Crops” webpage, the term “genetically engineered” was replaced with “Dicamba-tolerant” throughout the page. The image on the left features the page on October 30, 2018, with words that were removed highlighted in red. The image on the right features the page on November 1, 2018, with words that had been added highlighted in green.

We observed language changes that shifted the emphasis of partnerships or programs as well. It is to be expected that descriptions of partnerships and programs would evolve over time. However, certain language changes can also alter public perceptions of programs regardless of any actual changes to them. For example, on the webpage for “[EPA Efforts in the Asia-Pacific Region](#),” the description of a collaborative program with China was changed in 2018 to remove mention of “growing clean energy economies” and language was adjusted from “combating air pollution” to “improve air quality.” The webpage also removed all mentions of collaboration with Korea, highlighted partnership with Vietnam and reduced prominence of partnerships with Australia and Indonesia, removed links to partner initiatives, and weakened the language about the benefits of these collaborations (compare [before](#) and [after](#)).

Addition of Information

More than 25% of the changes we observed (74 of 294 entries) were additions of information. Three-quarters of these additions of information (55 of 74) were additions of information about a rule or requirement, including updating text to reflect a new policy, adding links to regulatory proceedings, or adding regulatory history. One-quarter of the

information additions we observed (19 of 74) were of related subject matter information, like further information about water quality challenges or regulatory compliance trends.

Addition of Regulatory Information

The majority of information additions we observed were directly related to active regulatory proceedings. This information is critically important for the public to learn about opportunities to participate in environmental decision-making, to understand where a rule is in the arc of development and implementation, and to hear about opposition to rules and regulations. This sort of information is essential to American democracy.

There are several examples of useful additions of information to help the public understand various regulations. In July 2017, the EPA updated its main [“Formaldehyde”](#) webpage to highlight EPA’s intention to delay the effective date of new standards and the rescission of a piece of regulation that had prohibited the labeling of products as compliant with new TSCA regulations prior to the effective date of those regulations (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). Both of these pieces of information are critically important to entities regulated by these rules, and for the public to understand when materials will be mandated to have lower formaldehyde concentrations. In August 2019, on EPA’s [webpage](#) listing actions to restrict waste disposal under clause [404\(c\) of the Clean Water Act](#), the EPA first removed, then restored and provided additional links about its determination to restrict mine disposal in Bristol Bay (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). This issue received significant attention due to the ecological importance of Bristol Bay and contention about the scope of information to be considered in evaluating the Pebble Mine permit application there. It is extremely important for the public to have access to the regulatory history and current situation of this issue.

Another high-visibility rule with a complex regulatory history is the Methane and Waste Prevention Rule. In fall 2020, the BLM substantially expanded the information on its [“Methane and Waste Prevention Rule”](#) webpage (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). The BLM added basic information about what the original 2016 rule covered, petitions filed after its promulgation, BLM’s 2018 deregulatory revisions to that rule, legal challenges to the 2018 revisions, and ultimately the court decision to reinstate the 2016 rule. Having a plain language explanation of this regulatory history in one place is important for the public to understand the law of the land and the trajectory of the rule. While there is not substantial information on the purpose of the rule, there is now clear information for the public and

regulated entities to read about its status. We hope that the next revision to this page provides further detail on the importance of the Methane and Waste Prevention Rule.

Addition of Other Relevant Information

Though less common than the addition of regulatory information, more than a third of the examples of additions we observed involved relevant information that was not explicitly regulatory but which had a bearing on the understanding of certain regulations. This type of content is essential to build environmental literacy and participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making at any level.

For example, in 2018, the EPA expanded its "[National Enforcement Initiative: Reducing Accidental Releases at Industrial and Chemical Facilities](#)" webpage (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). Under the "Problem" section, more information was provided about regulatory authority and specific regulations that can be used to better mitigate the risks of large-scale chemical and industrial spills and explosions. More information was also provided about how the initiative's goals may be achieved and EPA's progress toward those goals. The public is better equipped to care about and understand regulations pertaining to accidental industrial releases due to this contextual information EPA added.

There are several other examples in which the public is served by greater context as well. For example, in spring 2018, the EPA added much greater historical depth about the development of lists of Toxic and Priority Pollutants under the Clean Water Act (compare [before](#) and [after](#)), which explains some of the existing gaps as well as progress toward addressing them. Similarly, in spring 2017, the EPA expanded information about safe drinking water in Indian Country, added a description of and link to a public water supply compliance dashboard, descriptions of 2014 and 2015 snapshots of comprehensive reports, and highlights of recommendations from those reports (compare [before](#) and [after](#)). Previously, the page had very little content and simply linked to various resources. Now the public has access to much more information about the status of drinking water supply systems and compliance with drinking water regulations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings

Websites are the [primary means by which federal environmental agencies communicate with the public](#) and are resources paid for by American tax dollars to benefit the public. Changes to federal websites can directly affect public knowledge and perception of various issues, which in turn can affect public participation in environmental decision-making. This is especially true for topics with clear connections to regulations and active regulatory proceedings.

We examined the Trump administration's governance of web resources related to regulations by categorizing changes to federal websites throughout his term. Of the approximately 1,400 changes to federal environmental websites catalogued by EDGI's Website Monitoring Team since January 2017, 294 of the changes were directly related to regulations.

The most frequent and significant pattern we observed involved agencies impeding public knowledge by removing relevant resources during regulatory proceedings. Half (50%) of the changes in our sample involved removal of public resources from agency websites. In turn, the majority of these were of subject matter that provided important context on the purpose or effectiveness of regulations, including resources specifically geared toward non-expert audiences like fact sheets and guides. The vast majority of contextual resources that were taken down were removed slightly in advance of or during regulatory proceedings such as public comment periods. Several agencies engaged in this harmful web governance practice, and we observed [this trend outside our sample for this report as well](#). One significant example extending beyond this sample of regulation-related webpages was the removal of EPA's entire Climate Change website in April 2017.

We observed other web governance behaviors as well: 10% of our sample involved reducing navigability to resources; 15% of our sample involved substantial language changes that could impact public perception of issues (though most were not as overtly pro-industry as might have been expected); and 25% of our sample involved the addition of new pertinent information, mostly about rules and rule requirements, and some valuable context as well. Each of these types of web governance actions points to lessons we can learn for better and more consistent information policy in the future.

Recommendations

The Trump administration's web governance failures point to an urgent need for better digital information policies at the federal level. Though websites are the main conduit of information from agencies to the public and are often regarded as authoritative, born-digital resources are by and large excluded from federal record-keeping laws. There are no repercussions for agencies stripping public resources that contain inconvenient factual information for a given political agenda. In addition to resource maintenance, there are also very few requirements for the creation and provision of public information. The National Environmental Policy Act and Administrative Procedure Act have certain requirements, but those are focused on information that must be published in the Federal Register, not contextual information on agency websites.

In this digital age and at this juncture in the development and protection of our American democracy, EDGI recommends that the Biden administration swiftly develop progressive web-based information policies to be implemented across federal agencies and then codified into law. These policies and laws would provide standards for **web governance**, that is, the creation and management of data and informational resources provided on digital platforms. We recommend that regulatory-related resources—informational resources that pertain to the purpose, function, or impact of environmental laws—be a priority for improved web governance.

Create meaningful resources to expand civic and scientific literacy.

The first and most fundamental recommendation for web governance is the creation of more comprehensive resource compendia that can be understood and utilized by a range of audiences. [OMB Circular A-130 \(2016\)](#) recommends that target audiences be considered when determining information format (p 16). We recommend more specifically that resources implement **ladders of information** geared toward audiences with a variety of background knowledge, from novice to expert, such that the public can build their environmental and science literacy through engaging with federal websites (see Figure 7). Regulatory resources, especially those labeled as guides or guidelines, should provide summaries, definitions, and simple graphics tailored to the general public, with more detailed and nuanced resources linked and cited to inform an already well-versed audience. This organizing principle corresponds to **a hierarchy of information** that should govern all digital information, from general facts and guidance available on topic landing

pages to highly specific examples and scientific research available on pages that are easily navigated to from those basic topic pages.

The figure illustrates a 'ladder of information' on the EPA Clean Water Rule website. The rungs of the ladder, from top to bottom, are:

- Scholarly Information:** A screenshot of a blog post titled 'Scientific Report Shows Strong Connection Between Wetlands, Streams, Rivers and Estuaries'.
- Advanced Information:** A screenshot of a detailed report's table of contents.
- Intermediate Information:** A screenshot of a fact sheet titled 'WHY #CleanWaterRules'.
- Basic Information:** A screenshot of an infographic titled 'WHY #CleanWaterRules'.
- Basic Information:** A screenshot of a fact sheet titled 'The Clean Water Rule for LOCAL GOVERNMENT'.

At the bottom of the ladder is the URL: <https://www.epa.gov/cleanwaterrule>

Figure 7. The EPA Clean Water Rule website is a positive example of an agency providing a ladder of information for the public to learn more about an issue. The website provided basic information in the form of a handful of bullet points and an infographic (lower left), intermediate information in the form of audience-specific fact sheets (lower right), more advanced information in the form of a blog summarizing scientific findings (upper left), and scholarly information in the form of a report synthesizing information from more than 1,000 academic publications (upper right).

New web governance policies should include specific requirements for websites to describe the **scientific basis** for proposed and current environmental regulations, scientific evidence that suggests potential impacts of regulations or their repeal, and documentation of the most significant environmental effects of existing regulations. The scientific basis and method for cost-benefit analyses should also be provided.

There must also be a **mechanism for public feedback** about information on federal websites, beyond randomly distributed surveys to users, as recommended in [OMB Circular](#)

[A-130 \(2016\) \(p 16\)](#). Contact information for offices and personnel overseeing relevant programs or initiatives should be available as well.

Ensure resource accessibility.

Resources should be **available, discoverable, and navigable**. Guidelines published in [OMB Circular A-130 \(2016\) \(p 14\)](#) state that federal information should be managed “by making information accessible, discoverable, and usable by the public to the extent permitted by law,” and we fully concur. To assist agencies in actualizing that guidance, we recommend that primary topical pages link to and explain the relevance of related pages. Pages detailing regulations should link to and explain the relevance of all subject matter information providing context on the purpose, effectiveness, and/or enforcement and adherence to a rule. Ensuring visible relationships between regulations and their environmental context is critical to expanding informed public participation in rulemaking.

Information about upcoming regulatory matters should be widely posted on all webpages with relevant subject matter such that the **public is made aware of opportunities for civic engagement** and participation in environmental decision-making. There should also be requirements for describing the regulatory history of an issue, including legal challenges and decisions that affected the implementation of a rule.

Preserve Public Web Resources

In addition to requirements for the creation of content, these resources must be protected. While website information can be expected to be ephemeral as society has come to expect websites to be accurate and up to date, **resources should be accessibly archived**. The EPA hosts a large [online archive](#), but many other agencies do not, and EPA’s archive is not easily discovered or searched. For example, while many of the resources removed from EPA’s website were archived in its online archive, there were no links to the archived resources, and for most, no indication that the resource might be found there. For any URL that has been removed from active use, rather than simply registering as a “Page Not Found,” it should link to the latest archived version of that page. Agency archives should provide links to other archived pages, as was engineered for EPA’s [January 19, 2017 Snapshot](#).

We recommend that **specific notice requirements** be established and implemented for any resource removals (as is alluded to in [OMB Circular A-130 \(2016\) \(p 16\)](#)). For example, a

banner could be placed on a resource for a length of time prior to its removal. A **written explanation** should be required for the removal of any web resource, and there should be a central repository on each agency's website for these explanations, searchable at least by date, topic, URL, and keyword. We recommend that the removal of links from subject matter landing pages and resource repositories or directors also require prior notice and a written explanation. We also recommend the development of a searchable **database that describes content changes on webpages**. In order to notify website users of recent changes, we recommend that any webpage that has been edited within the last month contains a link to this searchable database.

During active regulatory proceedings, starting with a notice of proposed rulemaking through the effective date of the promulgated rule, no public resources should be removed from live agency websites. If resources become out of date during that time, banners should be applied to explain any outdated elements and point readers with links and explanations to updated resources.

In Sum

At this pivotal historical moment, the public deserves durable information policies that restore and advance faith in federal institutions and democratic processes at every level. The public must know that the information they read on federal websites is accurate and is not bent or blocked to serve political agendas. We believe that these recommendations for better web governance practices can assist the federal government in regaining and retaining public trust.

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Appendix A. Overview of official guidance that currently exists for federal web governance of regulatory-based resources

Web Infrastructure Guidance

[Digital.gov](#), an online repository to “help the government community deliver better digital services” is managed under the auspices of the GSA and OMB, and provides “people in the federal government with the tools, methods, practices and policy guidance they need to deliver effective and accessible digital services.” Its website is replete with resources, mostly provided via links, including a [Checklist of Requirements for Federal Websites and Digital Services](#), with each link describing and pointing to authorizing documents that bear on federal management of digital resources.

Prominent among these under [Governance](#) is OMB Circular A-130, Management of Federal Information Resources, [originally issued in 1996, updated in 2000](#), and [most recently revised in July 2016](#). With an emphasis on addressing the rapidly changing digital environment related to managing information technology (IT), security, data governance, and privacy, the 2016 version changed a section title from “Information Dissemination Management Systems” to “Information Management and Access” with the following provisions on p.16 that expand on the earlier section:

- 7) Agencies shall manage information in accordance with the following principles as appropriate:
 - a) Providing notice of Federal agency practices for the creation, collection, use, processing, preservation, storage, maintenance, disclosure, dissemination, and disposal of information, as appropriate;
 - b) Providing adequate notice when initiating, substantially modifying, or terminating dissemination of significant information that the public may be using;
 - c) Identifying the source of the information disseminated to the public, if from outside the agency, where practicable;
 - d) Considering target audiences of Federal information when determining format, frequency of update, and other information management decisions;
 - e) Considering the impact of decisions and actions in each stage of the information life cycle on other stages;
 - f) Considering the effects of information management actions on members of the public and State, local, tribal and territorial governments and their access to Federal information and ensure consultation with the public and those governments as appropriate;

- g) Seeking to satisfy new information needs through interagency or intergovernmental sharing of information, or through nongovernmental sources, where lawful and appropriate, before creating or collecting new information; and
- h) Complying with all applicable statutes and policies governing the disclosure or dissemination of information, including those related to the quality, privacy, security, accessibility, and other valid access, use, and dissemination restrictions.

Another guidance document that is prominently featured on digital.gov is M-17-06 "[Policies for Federal Agency Public Websites and Digital Services](#)." This memorandum, issued in November 2016, states as its opening sentence that "Federal Agency public websites and digital services are the primary means by which the public receives information from and interacts with the Federal Government." The memorandum lists 18 requirements, which are mostly infrastructural in nature. Two requirements are of particular interest to the topics discussed in this report. The requirement to use plain writing (section 14, p 16), states "Web content is most effective when it is easy to understand, find, and use. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires agencies to draft all public-facing web and print documents in plain writing, calling for agency writing to be clear, concise, and well-organized." The requirement to ensure access to mandatory content (section 16, pp 16-17) is pertinent as well, and lists about ten required pages and/or links to content, largely reflecting privacy laws and transparency laws.

The provisions described above, while general in nature, are integral to actively responsible and responsive web governance, and can help form the basis for a federal web governance practice that ensures access and retention of key resources, while serving as the foundation for developing procedures that incorporate regulatory-related resources as well.

Regulatory Information Requirements

Agencies are required to post substantial information about proposed rules in a few central web locations (not necessarily on the agency website). The Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs within the Office of Management and Budget collects and displays information about regulations on [reginfo.gov](#), including the Regulatory Agenda. The [Regulatory Agenda](#), also known as the Unified Agenda, is published semiannually and includes summary information about recently completed regulations and all regulations agencies plan to propose or alter in the next twelve months. All formal notices of proposed rulemaking and final rules are required to be published in the [Federal Register](#), which is

managed by the National Archives and Records Administration. Information about proposed rules is also posted to the [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) website, managed by the General Services Administration, where public comments are received and stored as well. Regulations.gov is described as “your source for information on the development of Federal regulations and other related documents issued by the U.S. government. Through this site, you can find, read, and comment on regulator issues that are important to you.” Currently regulations.gov is in [beta testing for a new version](#) which will have “enhanced search capabilities, a simplified commenting process, and a brand new design to improve the user experience in public commenting. Interestingly, this seemingly objective site includes a handful of categories which web visitors can click on to peruse the site, and the first category under Dockets is “Deregulatory,” followed by “Economically Significant,” and “Major Rule.”

Appendix B. Terms searched in EDGI's public dataset to construct the sample of regulatory-related website changes.

1. Act
2. Assessment
3. Audit
4. Burden
5. Comment
6. Compliance
7. Directive
8. Federal Register
9. Guidance
10. Guideline
11. Law
12. Opinion
13. Order
14. Procedure
15. Proceeding
16. Protection
17. Recommendation
18. Regulation
19. Regulatory
20. Requirement
21. Risk
22. Rule
23. Ruling
24. Security
25. Standard
26. Transparency
27. Violation
28. Bird
29. Chlorpyrifos
30. Coal Ash
31. Endangered
32. Fuel
33. Glider
34. Haze
35. Mercury
36. Monument
37. Ozone
38. Pesticide
39. Power
40. Sage Grouse
41. Stream
42. Wetland
43. Whales