

The Honorable Ben Nelson
720 Hart Senate Office Building

The Honorable John Hoeven
120 Russell Senate Office Building

The Honorable Ander Crenshaw
440 Cannon House Office Building

The Honorable Mike Honda
1713 Longworth House Office Building

April 10, 2012

Dear Senators Nelson and Hoeven and Representatives Crenshaw and Honda:

We are writing to ask you to improve public access to legislative information by directing the Library of Congress to publish the THOMAS database online. Congress created THOMAS with the mission of making federal legislation freely available to the public. While times have changed, and technologies have changed, THOMAS has not kept up.

As a result, millions of Americans access basic information about legislation and congressional actions through online information providers like GovTrack, OpenCongress, and Washington Watch. These free non-governmental websites are forced to rely on brittle programs to harvest information from THOMAS's complex website. This harvesting is imperfect, expensive, and time consuming. The better approach -- which has been adopted by industry and many in government -- is to publish legislative information "in bulk" in addition to other means.

Bulk access would in essence make the entire legislative database available for download, instead of requiring users to gather information by visiting hundreds or thousands of web pages. It would make it easier for third parties to build innovative new tools, and ensure that Americans have the most accurate information at their fingertips. Congress already expressed its support for bulk access downloads in 2009, but the Library of Congress, which oversees THOMAS, has not acted. In the meantime, GPO, the executive branch, and the House of Representatives are already publishing information online in bulk.

The time has come for action. In this year's legislative branch appropriations bill, we urge you to direct the Library of Congress to implement bulk access to THOMAS within 120 days. The Library should also immediately create an advisory committee on improving public access to legislative information composed of people inside and outside of government. Congress should ensure that THOMAS lives up to its potential of making the legislative branch more open and transparent.

For more information, please contact Daniel Schuman, policy counsel, the Sunlight Foundation, at 202-742-1520 x 273 or dschuman@sunlightfoundation.com.

Association of Research Libraries
Center for Media and Democracy
Center for Responsive Politics
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington
Civic Impulse LLC (GovTrack.us)
Demand Progress
Director, Legal Information Institute
DownsizeDC.org, Inc.
Essential Information
First Street by CQ Press
Free Government Information (<http://freegovinfo.info>)
Freedom of Information Center at the University of Missouri School of Journalism
Government Accountability Project
iSolon.org
James Madison Project
MapLight
National Freedom of Information Coalition
National Priorities Project
National Security Counselors
Open North
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Tabulaw, Inc.
The Sunlight Foundation
Union of Concerned Scientists
Washington Coalition for Open Government
WashingtonWatch.com