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NOTE: H.R. 3060, approved October 2, was assigned Public Law No. 104–227.

Statement on Signing the Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996

October 2, 1996

I am pleased to sign into law today H.R. 3802, the ''Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996.''

This bill represents the culmination of several years of leadership by Senator Patrick Leahy to bring this important law up to date. Enacted in 1966, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was the first law to establish an effective legal right of access to government information, underscoring the crucial need in a democracy for open access to government information by citizens. In the last 30 years, citizens, scholars, and reporters have used FOIA to obtain vital and valuable government information.

Since 1966, the world has changed a great deal. Records are no longer principally maintained in paper format. Now, they are maintained in a variety of technologies, including CD ROM and computer tapes and diskettes, making it easier to put more information on-line.

My Administration has launched numerous initiatives to bring more government information to the public. We have established World Wide Web pages, which identify and link information resources throughout the Federal Government. An enormous range of documents and data, including the Federal budget, is now available on-line or in electronic format, making government more accessible than ever. And in the last year, we have declassified unprecedented amounts of national security material, including information on nuclear testing.

The legislation I sign today brings FOIA into the information and electronic age by clarifying that it applies to records maintained in electronic format. This law also broadens public access to government information by placing more material on-line and expanding the role of the agency reading room. As the Government actively disseminates more information, I hope that there will be less need to use FOIA to obtain government information.

This legislation not only affirms the importance, but also the challenge of maintaining openness in government. In a period of government downsizing, the numbers of requests continue to rise. In addition, growing numbers of requests are for information that must be reviewed for declassification, or in which there is a proprietary interest or a privacy concern. The result in many agencies is huge backlogs of requests.

In this Act, the Congress recognized that with today's limited resources, it is frequently difficult to respond to a FOIA request within the 10 days formerly required in the law. This legislation extends the legal response period to 20 days.

More importantly, it recognizes that many FOIA requests are so broad and complex that they cannot possibly be completed even within this longer period, and the time spent processing them only delays other requests. Accordingly, H.R. 3802 establishes procedures for an agency to discuss with requesters ways of tailoring large requests to improve responsiveness. This approach explicitly recognizes that FOIA works best when agencies and requesters work together.

Our country was founded on democratic principles of openness and accountability, and for 30 years, FOIA has supported these principles. Today, the ''Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996'' reforges an important link between the United States Government and the American people.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
October 2, 1996.

NOTE: H.R. 3802, approved October 2, was assigned Public Law No. 104–231.

Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Eminent Domain Prevention Act

October 2, 1996

To the House of Representatives:

I am returning herewith without my approval H.R. 2909, the "Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Eminent Domain Prevention Act."

This bill would prohibit the use of eminent domain authority for the protection of the public's fish and wildlife resources at portions of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in the States of New Hampshire and Vermont. Because it is unnecessary and would undermine important governmental interests, I cannot support it.

First, the Conte Refuge poses no threat to property owners. Located along the Connecticut River in the States of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, it represents an entirely new kind of national wildlife refuge. Rather than relying on the traditional approach of acquiring large tracts of land, the comprehensive plan for the Conte Refuge provides that only small amounts will come into Federal ownership—a total of only 1,200 acres in New Hampshire and Vermont, along with conservation easements for an additional 760 acres. Instead of Federal land acquisition, the main emphasis for the Refuge will be on restoring the Connecticut River watershed through voluntary partnerships, cooperative agreements, and environmental education. The Fish and Wildlife Service has no intention of using its eminent domain authority.

Second, this bill would undermine a constitutionally bestowed authority of the Federal Government by prohibiting the use of eminent domain for fish and wildlife conservation. The truth is that the Fish and Wildlife Service almost never uses eminent domain for wildlife conservation purposes—on a nationwide basis, since 1989, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has only used its eminent domain power with the consent of the owner to settle price or title differences. Still, eminent domain remains an important tool of last resort, to protect the public's interest in fish and wildlife resources should unforeseen circumstances arise.

Private property is a fundamental American right and value. But this bill is unnecessary and would erode a constitutional authority that has served the public interest for over 200 years. As stated during debate on the bill in the House of Representatives, H.R. 2909 is a solution in search of a problem.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
October 2, 1996.

Proclamation 6924—National Student Voter Education Day, 1996

October 2, 1996

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

This election season marks the 25th anniversary of suffrage for Americans between the ages of 18 and 20. With the ratification of the 26th amendment to the Constitution in July of 1971, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, our Nation placed its trust in these young people and gave them a clearer voice in the halls of government.

America's bold experiment in self-government has inspired over 200 years of struggle for a more complete sense of justice and freedom, an effort etched in the history of the Constitution and its amendments. Emancipation, women's suffrage, civil rights, voting rights—all of these battles were fought and won by citizens of conscience and conviction who joined together to bring our Nation closer to the ideals enshrined in our Constitution of full and equal representation and participation.

Since 1971, America's young adults have taken their rightful place in this march toward true democracy and opportunity. Living up to the trust placed in them and meeting this profound responsibility of citizenship, they have voted in large numbers and have played a crucial role in choosing leaders and defining issues at the local, State, and national levels. Generous in spirit, optimistic and idealistic in outlook, they have often proved to be the conscience of our Nation.