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INTRODUCTION TO THE GENERAL RECORDS SCHEDULES

General Records Schedules (GRS) are issued by the Archivist of the United States to provide disposition authorization for records common to several or all agencies of the Federal Government. They include records relating to civilian personnel, fiscal accounting, procurement, communications, printing, and other common functions, and certain nontextual records. They also include records relating to temporary commissions, boards, councils and committees. These records comprise an estimated one-third of the total volume of records created by Federal agencies.

In 1978, use of the GRS was made legally mandatory. The disposal authorizations must be used by a Federal agency to the greatest extent possible. Because these schedules are designed to cover records common to several agencies, many of the records descriptions are general. Agency records officers may either use the schedules as an appendix to an agency printed schedule or tailor the general schedules to the agency's own particular needs and incorporate them into agency schedules.

The GRS covers only records that are common among several agencies. For complete coverage of the disposition of all its records, each agency must independently develop schedules for the remaining records. Agencies should exercise particular care in applying items in GRS 1-16 and 18 to subject or correspondence files that may include a mix of administrative and program records. Usually, administrative subject files have short retention periods, less than 3 years. Program subject files may be needed by the agency for 10 years or more and may have archival value as well. Except when the volume of administrative records is negligible, agencies should maintain administrative records separately from program records in their agency recordkeeping systems. If administrative records are mixed with program records in the recordkeeping system and cannot be economically segregated, the entire file must be kept for the period of time approved for the program records. Similarly, if documents described in the GRS are part of a subject or case file that documents activities different from those covered by the schedules, they should be treated in the same manner as the files of which they are a part.

For more information on scheduling records not covered by the GRS, including potentially permanent records, see the Disposition of Federal Records Handbook. Also, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has prepared a series of instructional guides that provide information on scheduling nontextual records that are not covered by the GRS. The handbook and separate guides on electronic records, audiovisual records, and cartographic and architectural records are available from the National Archives and Records Administration (NWCP), Room G-9, Washington, DC 20408.

GRS items cover only record copies. In some instances, more than one copy of a document or file would be considered a record if different offices use it to perform different functions. When it is difficult to decide whether files are record or nonrecord materials, the records officer should treat them as records. Records officers may consult with the NARA Life Cycle Management Division (NWML) to determine the record or nonrecord status of particular files.

The disposition instructions in the GRS are to be implemented without further approval from NARA, with the exception that most records created before January 1, 1921, must first be offered to NARA for appraisal. If NARA rejects these records they may be destroyed immediately. GRS 3, 11, 16, and 21 have other delimiting dates. Agencies that convert records covered by the GRS to microform should apply the GRS disposition standards to the microform copies and destroy the paper copies after verification of the film unless legal considerations require longer retention of the paper (36 CFR

1230.10(b)). No further authorization from NARA is required to implement these provisions. If an agency wishes to apply a different retention period for any series of records included in the GRS, the records officer must submit a Standard Form (SF) 115 providing justification for the deviation.

The GRS includes an index of commonly used Standard and Optional Forms. The forms index includes only the forms most frequently used by the various Government agencies.

Items at the end of GRS 1-16, 18, 23, 24, 25 and 26 provide disposition instructions for electronic mail and word processing copies, maintained apart from the recordkeeping copy, of the records described in the other items in those schedules. The other items authorize the disposition of the recordkeeping copy. The electronic mail and word processing records covered in each of those schedules are those that remain in personal and shared directories after the recordkeeping copy has been produced, and electronic copies used for dissemination, revision, or updating that are maintained in addition to the recordkeeping copy.

Questions of applicability of any GRS item to agency records or differences of interpretation between the records officer and other agency personnel that cannot be reconciled within the agency may be referred to the Director, Life Cycle Management Division (NWML), NARA, from offices in the Washington, DC area, or the NARA regional records services facility from offices outside the Washington, DC area.

Some records series covered by the GRS are eligible for retirement to the Washington National Records Center or to records center storage in a NARA regional records services facility. Records should be retired from agency space to such storage only if transfer costs do not exceed the expense of retaining them in agency space. Records sent to records center storage in a NARA facility should have a remaining retention of at least 1 year. If special circumstances, such as lack of filing equipment or space, make it imperative that records be retired, exceptions can be made to this policy. These decisions are made on an individual basis by the appropriate NARA facility director. Procedures for transfer of records to records center storage in a NARA facility are found in NARA regulations (36 CFR 1228.152).