

FACT SHEET

The Access to Information Act

The Access to Information Act (ATIA) provides Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and individuals and corporations present in Canada a right to access records under the control of government institutions, in accordance with the principles that government information should be available to the public, that necessary exceptions to the right of access should be limited and specific, and that decisions on the disclosure of government information should be reviewed independently of government.

The ATIA has not been significantly updated since its implementation in 1983, when government records were predominantly paper-based. The ATIA is now out of sync with the modern digital environment and evolving public expectations.

The ATIA balances access to government information with exemptions and exclusions that protect other important democratic values, such as the need for the public service to provide full, free and frank advice to ministers; the protection of the confidentiality of Cabinet deliberations; the protection of personal information; and national security considerations.

Roughly 240 government institutions are currently subject to the ATIA, comprising 82 departments and agencies and approximately 160 Crown corporations and wholly-owned subsidiaries.

An institution subject to the ATIA has 30 calendar days to reply to a request and give written notice as to whether or not access to the record requested will be provided. If the institution is unable to meet the 30-day time limit, the ATIA permits extensions under specific conditions. A requester who is not satisfied with a time extension or with the information an institution releases in response to a request can submit a complaint to the Information Commissioner. Once the Commissioner has completed his investigation and made his recommendations, the requester, or the Commissioner with the consent of the requester, may seek judicial review from the Federal Court of Canada of an institution's decision not to disclose a record or to take an extension to respond to the request.

Access to Information Act statistics

There is continued growth in the number of access to information requests. In fiscal year 2016 to 2017 there were 91,880 requests received across the federal government, a 22% increase from the 2015 to 2016 fiscal year.

Institutions processed 16 million pages in fiscal year 2016 to 2017, a 78% increase from the 9 million pages processed in the 2015 to 2016 fiscal year.