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Agency Information Collection Activities; Proposals, Submissions, and Approvals Acquisition Regulation; Collection of Qualitative Feedback on Agency Service Delivery; OMB Control No. 3090-0297

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Submitter Information

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General Comment

See attached file(s)

Attachments

20130211_TechAmerica_Cost_Comment_Generic_Clearance



February 11, 2013

Via Regulations.gov
General Services Administration
Regulatory Secretariat (MVCB)
1275 First Street NE
Washington, DC 20417

Attn: Hada Flowers/ /IC 3090-0297, Generic Clearance

RE: Information Collection 3090-0297, Generic Clearance

Dear Ms. Flowers:

On behalf of the Technology Association of America, Inc.¹ ("TechAmerica"), I am pleased to submit the following comment to FAR; Information Collection; OMB Control Number 0309-0297, Generic Clearance to the General Services Administration ("the Agency") published in the *Federal Register* at 77 FR 74191 on December 13, 2012 and requested public comment regarding an extension of a previously approved information collection requirement from the Office of Management and Budget ("OMB"). This comment will address the Agency's estimate of the public burden of performing the information collection requirements. In short, the Agency's estimate does not accurately reflect the public burden because it is based on invalid assumptions and a flawed methodology. Consequently, TechAmerica opposes granting the Agency's requested extension under the Paperwork Reduction Act (the "Act").

A. An Extension of the Information Collection Requirement Would Violate the Fundamental Purposes of the Paperwork Reduction Act.

Granting the Agency's request for an extension would contradict the fundamental purposes of the Act. Congress intended that the Act would "minimize the paperwork burden . . . resulting from the collection of information . . . and ensure the greatest possible public benefit from and maximize the utility of information created, collected, maintained, used, shared and disseminated by or for the Federal Government."² Granting the Agency's request for an extension of its previously approved information

¹ TechAmerica is the leading voice for the U.S. technology industry – the driving force behind productivity growth and job creation in the United States and the foundation of the global innovation economy. Representing premiere technology companies of all sizes, we are the industry's only trade association dedicated to advocating for the ICT sector before decision makers at the state, federal and international levels of government. With offices in Washington, D.C., Silicon Valley, Brussels and Beijing, as well as regional offices around the U.S., we deliver our members top tier business intelligence and networking opportunities on a global scale. We are committed to expanding market opportunities and driving the competitiveness of the U.S. technology industry around the world. Learn more about TechAmerica at www.techamerica.org.

² Paperwork Reduction Act, 44 U.S.C. § 3501.

collection requirement would contravene these essential purposes by continuing to significantly underestimate the paperwork burden imposed by this requirement. We believe that if an accurate assessment of the reporting burden were conducted, the Office of Management and Budget ("OMB") would recognize that the Agency has not met its high burden under the Act to justify the paperwork requirements. Further, the Act correctly notes that information collection creates a burden not only on the entity submitting the information, but also imposes administrative and cost burdens on the Agency that is collecting the information. The Agency's actions in this request are inconsistent with the Act's intended purpose to "minimize the cost to the Federal Government of the creation, collection, maintenance, use, dissemination, and disposition of information."³ With the Government continuing to face increased budget constraints, it is more important now than ever to minimize these costs. For these reasons, President Obama has issued a number of Executive Orders and memoranda seeking to "get rid of absurd and unnecessary paperwork requirements that waste time and money."⁴ The Agency has expended considerable amounts of its scarce resources in seeking this extension, and if the extension is granted, it would extend and perhaps increase the cost to the Government without sufficient justification. Instead of expanding or retaining information collection requirements, agencies should be seeking to create savings by reducing or eliminating such requirements.

B. The Agency Does Not Accurately Estimate the Public Burden an Extension of the Information Collection Requirement Would Create.

The Act defines the public burden an extension of the information collection would create:

Burden is the time, represented as hours spent by the public responding to Federal information collections. When an agency estimates and seeks to reduce the paperwork burden it imposes on the public, the agency must consider the time that an individual or entity spends reading and

³ *Id.*

⁴ Executive Order 13563; Executive Order 13579 *available at* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2011/m11-28.pdf>; "Presidential Memoranda – Regulatory Flexibility, Small Business, and Job Creation," January 18, 2011, *available at* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/18/presidential-memoranda-regulatory-flexibility-small-business-and-job-cre>; "Presidential Memoranda – Administrative Flexibility," January 18, 2011, *available at* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/28/presidential-memorandum-administrative-flexibility>; "Minimizing Paperwork and Reporting Burdens; Data Call for the 2011 Information Collection Budget" *available at* http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/inforeg/icb/2011_ICB_Data_Call.pdf; President Barack Obama, "Toward a 21st Century Regulatory System," *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2011, *available at* <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703396604576088272112103698.html>; *see also* "Presidential Memoranda – Regulatory Flexibility, Small Business, and Job Creation," January 18, 2011, *available at* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/18/presidential-memoranda-regulatory-flexibility-small-business-and-job-cre>; "Presidential Memoranda – Administrative Flexibility," January 18, 2011, *available at* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/28/presidential-memorandum-administrative-flexibility>; "Minimizing Paperwork and Reporting Burdens; Data Call for the 2011 Information Collection Budget" *available at* http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/inforeg/icb/2011_ICB_Data_Call.pdf.

understanding a request for information, as well as the time spent developing, compiling, recording, reviewing, and providing the information.⁵

We respectfully submit that the Agency has not faithfully applied this definition nor fully complied with its obligations under the Act and the implementing regulations in 5 C.F.R. Part 1320. See 5 C.F.R. § 1320.8 ("This review [of the information collection requirement] shall include ... [a] **specific, objectively supported** estimate of burden, which shall include, in the case of an existing collection of information, an evaluation of the burden that has been imposed by such collection." (emphasis added)). The methodology used by the Agency in this request is insufficient.

Specifically, the Agency estimates that 145,534 respondents will be subject to this requirement annually, of these respondents there will be 48,511 annual responses, and 3.82 minutes will be required per response. As an initial matter, the Agency's estimate of 145,534 respondents appears understated. This information collection requirement concerns qualitative feedback from the General Service Administration's ("GSA") customers on service delivery. Based upon the immense number of GSA customers, both internally (e.g. the civilian and military federal workforce in both classified and unclassified environments) and externally (e.g. individual citizens, businesses, research organizations, and state, local, and tribal governments), we believe that the actual number of respondents under this information collection is far greater than the unsubstantiated estimate put forth in the Federal Register notice (likely 5 to 10 times greater than the estimate).

In addition, the Agencies offer no explanation in the Federal Register notice of how they computed the number of annual responses. Presumptively, not all GSA customers participate in this information collection. Of those that do participate by providing feedback on service delivery, it is unclear whether each response is from a unique respondent. For purposes of assessing this and every information collection requirement, establishing a reliable number of annual respondents and responses per respondent through the use of verifiable data is fundamental to calculating the total annual burden hours. For these reasons, we respectfully request that the Agency substantiates both figures. In doing so, the Agency should use either the actual number of responses during the most recent fiscal year or provide an estimate based upon the number of responses during the last three to five fiscal years. The Agency should then divide the total number of responses by the number of respondents to arrive at a reliable estimate for the number of responses per respondent.

⁵ Information Collection Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2010, Office of Management and Budget, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs at 1.

Next, the Agency's average burden estimate of 3.82 minutes is also unrealistically low and unsubstantiated. The Agency is seeking "qualitative feedback" which means "information that provides useful insights on perceptions and opinions."⁶ Further, the Agency has asserted that The Digital Government Strategy has driven government agencies to develop a "customer-centric principle" so that they may "understand the customer's business, needs and desires."⁷ It is unrealistic to expect that a customer can provide sufficient information for the Agency to garner useful insights, perceptions, and opinions in this amount of time—let alone further the aim of developing its customer-centric principle. In short, the Agency is, at best, being unduly optimistic to believe that a respondent can comply with this information collection requirement in less than four minutes. We respectfully submit that a more reasonable estimate of the burden would likely be in the range of 5 to 10 minutes per response.

Because the estimated number of respondents, annual responses, responses per respondent, and burden per response are unsubstantiated and appear significantly understated, the estimated 9,314 total burden hours is entirely unreliable as well. It is our hope, through this comment, that by examining the Agency's burden estimates more closely, a true accounting of the total public burden hours can be achieved and the essential purposes of the Act will be furthered.

C. The Collective Burden of Compliance with the Information Collection Requirement Greatly Exceeds the Agency's Estimate and Outweighs Any Potential Utility of the Extension.

In addition to the burden the information collection in this request imposes on individual respondents, there is an immense collective burden imposed on all respondents. OMB estimates that, in Fiscal Year 2010, the public spent 8.8 billion hours responding to information collections.⁸ This estimate is ten percent (10 percent), or one billion hours less than the previous fiscal year. While this reduction seems to represent a victory in furthering the purposes of the Act, it is unlikely these estimates provide an accurate picture of the overall burden. In the same report, OMB identifies four causes of the paperwork burden change: (1) adjustments to agency burden estimates; (2) new statutory requirements; (3) discretionary agency actions; and (4) lapses in OMB approval.⁹ OMB found that, of these four causes, adjustments "accounted for most of the overall decrease in Federal paperwork burden in FY 2010."¹⁰

⁶ Federal Register. Vol. 77, No. 240 at 74192.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Supra* note 5 at iv.

⁹ *Supra* note 5 at 2.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 6.

Based on a review of the acquisition-related Information Collection waiver requests published in the Federal Register between June of 2008 and June of 2011, using the Government's estimates, there are over 30 million total hours, across all respondents, of information collection burden required of the government acquisition community annually.¹¹ As noted above and highlighted below, the methodology behind these estimates is woefully inadequate, and consequently, the total burden and the associated costs are far higher than the Agency estimates. Such a burdensome paperwork requirement imposes unnecessary expenses for both the Government and the respondents, without demonstrating a clear value to the taxpayer that would justify the additional cost.

While the Agency is under immense pressure to reduce the number of information collection hours it imposes upon the public, it should not avoid its statutory responsibility by providing an artificially low estimate of the burden. We respectfully submit that assessing the impact in a horizontal fashion as part of a total burden on respondents was the intent, if not the letter, of the Act. The Agency should be responsible for assessing the total information collection burden they create and the need for extending this additional burden in that context. Further, OMB should make a comparable cumulative assessment across the entire Federal Government and objectively consider the need to increase or sustain that burden as part of their review of this request.

D. The Government's Response to the Paperwork Reduction Act Waiver for FAR Case 2007-006 is Instructive on the Total Burden for Respondents.

As noted above, TechAmerica challenges the methodology behind estimating the burden on each respondent to comply with this information collection requirement. We believe that the Agency's estimated burden hours should be modified in this instance for the same reason that they were modified upward in FAR Case 2007-006. In that case, a final rule contained an information collection requirement that brought it under the authority of the Act. The Government initially estimated a total burden of three hours per response. During the open comment period, only one comment was received; however, that was sufficient to show that a modification of the Government's estimate was necessary. After comment, the Government conceded that the methodology and the resultant estimate did not accurately reflect the total burden, as defined in the Act, imposed upon the company. After modification, the revised burden was sixty hours per response, meaning that the initial annual reporting burden of three hours was off by a factor of twenty.

The Agency has failed in this information collection waiver request to rationalize how it arrived at the estimated burden as required by the Act and the implementing regulations

¹¹ See attachment.

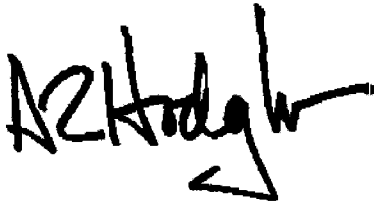
February 11, 2013

6 | Page

in 5 C.F.R. Part 1320. We submit that the Agency's current estimate has failed to consider the time necessary for collection and review of the information prior to submission. Because the Agency has not effectively measured the burden as defined in the Act under this request nor demonstrated that the burden is justified from the perspective of the taxpayer, Government, the Agency, or the respondents, we respectfully submit that the Agency's request should be denied.

TechAmerica appreciates this opportunity to comment, and would be pleased to respond to any questions the Agency may have on these comments.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A.R. Hodgkins" with a stylized flourish at the end.

A.R. "Trey" Hodgkins, III
Senior Vice President