



BN53244401

DEFENCE FOI 154/22/23 STATEMENT OF REASONS UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

1. I refer to the application by [REDACTED] under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (FOI Act) for access to:

“May I please request all emails and supporting file attachments, sent either to/from, or bcc/cc’d Air Vice Marshall Catherine Roberts, AM, CSC, Commander Defence Space Command for the period 1 July 2022 to 19 September 2022 (inclusive), that contain any of the following keywords: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena; UAP; UAPs; Unidentified Flying Object; UFO; UFOs; Unidentified Flying Objects; Unauthorised Aircraft Movement; UAM; Unauthorised Aircraft Movements; UAMs; Unusual Aerial Sighting; Unusual Aerial Sightings; UAS; UASs; Unidentified Phenomena; Unexplained Aerial Phenomena; unidentified; unexplained; unusual air traffic; unidentified aerospace-undersea phenomena; man-made. I request that personal details be limited to the full names of individuals involved in any applicable FOI response.”

FOI decision maker

2. I am the authorised officer pursuant to section 23 of the FOI Act to make a decision on this FOI request.

Documents identified

3. I identified one document as matching the description of the request.

Decision

4. I have decided to:
- a. partially release one document in accordance with section 22 [access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted] of the FOI Act, on the grounds that the deleted material is considered exempt under subsection 47E(c) [public interest conditional exemptions-certain operations of agencies] of the FOI Act; and
 - b. remove irrelevant material under section 22 of the FOI Act.

Material taken into account

5. In making my decision, I had regard to:
- a. the terms of the request;
 - b. the content of the identified document in issue;
 - c. relevant provisions in the FOI Act; and
 - d. the Guidelines published by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the Guidelines).

Reasons for decision

Section 47E – Certain operations of agencies

6. I identified one document containing information relating to Defence personnel, including names and email addresses. Subsection 47E(c) of the FOI Act states:

A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under this Act would, or could reasonably be expected to, do any of the following:

(c) have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel by the Commonwealth or by an agency;

7. The Australian Information Commissioner has issued Guidelines under section 93A to which regard must be had for the purposes of performing a function, or exercising a power, under the FOI Act. In relation to subsection 47E(c) of the FOI Act, the Guidelines explain that, where the document relates to the agency's policies and practices relating to the assessment and management of personnel, the decision maker must address whether:

- a. an effect would reasonably be expected following disclosure; and
- b. the expected effect would be both substantial and adverse.

8. For this exemption to apply, the documents must relate to either:

- i. the management of personnel – including the broader human resources policies and activities, recruitment, promotion, compensation, discipline, harassment and occupational health and safety; and
- ii. the assessment of personnel – including the broader performance management policies and activities concerning competency, in-house training requirements, appraisals and underperformance, counselling, feedback, assessment for bonus or eligibility for progression.

9. The information contained within the document identifies personnel who have been involved in the, or contributed to, information pertaining to Senate Estimate Briefs and material relating to Unidentified Flying Objects. Releasing this information could reasonably be expected to increase the likelihood of these individuals being contacted directly, or harassed, regarding their involvement in the subject matter.

10. It is important that Defence is able to manage its personnel, including its culture and morale. Failure to do so would unfairly affect those personnel involved, and could reasonably be expected to have a substantial adverse effect on the overall management of those personnel.

11. In conclusion, I am satisfied that the material is conditionally exempt under subsection 47E(c) of the FOI Act.

12. Section 11A(5) of the FOI Act requires an agency to allow access to an exempt document unless, in the circumstances, access to the document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest. My public interest considerations are set out below.

Public interest consideration – Section 47E

13. In assessing whether disclosure is on balance, contrary to the public interest, I considered the Guidelines together with a range of factors set out in section 11B(3) of the FOI Act, which favours access to a document. These include whether access to the document would:

- a. promote the objects of this Act (including all the matters set out in sections 3 and 3A);
- b. inform debate on a matter of public importance;
- c. promote effective oversight of public expenditure;
- d. allow a person to access his or her own personal information

14. I note that disclosure of the document may promote some of the objects of the FOI Act, as information held by the Government is a national resource. However, disclosure of the specific conditionally exempt material would not increase public participation in the Defence process, nor would it increase scrutiny or discussion of Defence activities.

15. Paragraph 6.22 of the Guidelines specifies a non-exhaustive list of public interest factors against disclosure. The factors I find particularly relevant to this request are that release of this information could reasonably be expected to prejudice or harm:

- a. the protection of an individual's right to privacy;
- b. the interests of an individual or group of individuals; and/or
- c. the management function of an agency.

16. While I consider that release of the material removed under subsection 47E(c) may be of some interest to the applicant, disclosure of the conditionally exempt material would not inform public debate on any matter of public importance in any meaningful way. There is also a public interest in maintaining the confidentiality of the names and contact details of Defence personnel who are involved in administrative operations, where there is an expectation that Defence manages its personnel's information in a sensitive way.

17. Noting all of the above, I consider that, on balance the public interest factors against disclosure outweigh the factors for disclosure. I have therefore decided that it would be contrary to the public interest to release the information considered exempt under subsection 47E(c) of the FOI Act.

18. None of the factors listed in section 11B(4) [Irrelevant Factors] of the FOI Act were taken into account when making this decision.

Further Information

19. The Department of Defence does not have a protocol for reporting or recording of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) or Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO). The Air Force ceased handling reports of UAP or UFO in 1996 after determining that there was no scientific or other compelling reason for the Air Force to continue to devote resources to the recording and investigation of UAP or UFO.

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KM Stein
Group Captain
Accredited Decision Maker
Royal Australian Air Force