

WAC 44-14-03005 Retention of records. An agency is not required to retain every record it ever created or used. The state and local records committees approve a general retention schedule for state and local agency records that applies to records that are common to most agencies.¹ Individual agencies seek approval from the state or local records committee for retention schedules that are specific to their agency, or that, because of particular needs of the agency, must be kept longer than provided in the general records retention schedule. The retention schedules for state and local agencies are available at www.sos.wa.gov/archives/ (select "Records Management").

Retention schedules vary based on the content of the record. For example, documents with no value such as internal meeting scheduling emails can be destroyed when no longer needed, but documents such as periodic accounting reports must be kept for a period of years. Because different kinds of records must be retained for different periods of time, an agency is prohibited from automatically deleting all emails after a short period of time (such as thirty days). While many of the emails (like other public records) could be destroyed when no longer needed, many others must be retained for several years. Indiscriminate automatic deletion of all emails or other public records after a short period no matter what their content may prevent an agency from complying with its retention duties and could complicate performance of its duties under the Public Records Act. An agency should have a retention policy in which employees save retainable documents and delete nonretainable ones. An agency is strongly encouraged to train employees on retention schedules. Public records officers must receive training on retention of electronic records. RCW 42.56.152(5).

The lawful destruction of public records is governed by retention schedules. The unlawful destruction of public records can be a crime. RCW 40.16.010 and 40.16.020.

An agency is prohibited from destroying a public record, even if it is about to be lawfully destroyed under a retention schedule, if a public records request has been made for that record. RCW 42.56.100. Additional retention requirements might apply if the records may be relevant to actual or anticipated litigation. The agency is required to retain the record until the record request has been resolved. An exception exists for certain portions of a state employee's personnel file. RCW 42.56.110.

Note: ¹An agency can be found to violate the Public Records Act and be subject to the attorneys' fees and penalty provision if it prematurely destroys a requested record after a request is made. See *Yacobellis v. City of Bellingham*, 55 Wn. App. 706, 780 P.2d 272 (1989). However, it is not a violation of the Public Records Act if a record is destroyed prior to an agency's receipt of a public records request for that record. *Bldg. Indus. Ass'n of Wash. v. McCarthy*, 152 Wn. App. 720, 218 P.3d 196 (2009); *West v. Dep't of Nat. Res.*, 163 Wn. App. 238, 258 P.3d 78 (2011). The Public Records Act (chapter 42.56 RCW) and the records retention statutes (chapter 40.14 RCW) are two different laws.

[Statutory Authority: RCW 42.56.570. WSR 18-06-051, § 44-14-03005, filed 3/2/18, effective 4/2/18. Statutory Authority: 2005 c 483 § 4, RCW 42.17.348. WSR 06-04-079, § 44-14-03005, filed 1/31/06, effective 3/3/06.]