

GPO's New govinfo Site

by Paul M. Birch

It's about time. Seven years after its official launch¹, the Government Printing Office's rather dated looking FDsys website is soon to have a fresh replacement, <https://govinfo.gov>. Still in beta testing, the site already bears the rakishly lowercased call-name "govinfo." Those, like myself, who have been unsure about how to pronounce "FDsys" should be thankful enough for this alone. But GPO has delivered more than just a name change. The forthcoming site is in many ways a vast improvement over its predecessor.

The overall look of the govinfo front page, as compared to FDsys', exemplifies much that has happened in web design in the intervening years. Gone from this new home page is the characteristically early 21st century bordered look that robbed FDsys of a quarter of the screen, along with the tiny print links that contributed to a layout that, by today's standards, could only be described as cluttered. Direct linkage on the new front page is relatively sparse. The left column features a handful of current awareness items, providing quick access for those who visit the site daily to browse the *Federal Register* or *Congressional Record*. The right column is devoted to a rotation of thematic featured links to relevant federal documents or curated collections — a short piece commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Federal Highway Act with a link to the Act, for example. Those who miss seeing their most-used links on the front page are only a click away from an alphabetical browse list that encompasses the entire site.

The focal point of the govinfo front page is a search form that provides options for simple one-line queries, along with a crisply designed advanced search and a citation search that provides helpful syntax tips for citing publications. Search results appear on a page that

offers an assortment of facet-narrowing checkboxes similar to what we see on today's commercial legal research sites. Searching is full-text in scope, enhanced greatly by GPO's long-time excellence in providing metadata.

Very notably, the transition to govinfo provides users of the site with something previously unavailable: a well-designed mobile version. In their introductory overview of the site, GPO notes that their mobile strategy will be browser based only and that they have no plans to provide a free-standing govinfo app.²

From the above, it is evident that GPO is serving up a modernized and in many ways more user-friendly online home for the huge volume of content it publishes. Does this mean that attorneys should rethink their online research strategies and make more use of government published tools as a first resort?

For the most part, probably not. GPO makes no claim that govinfo expands in any way the resources available to users; they can only offer what they publish. Their *U.S. Code* still provides no annotations. Their published cases (with exceptions) include no headnotes, digesting, or citators. Their congressional documents are not organized by public law to provide easy-access legislative histories.³ All in all, GPO has never produced a full-blown system for researching the law, and an improved website doesn't really change this. For many, the site will be most useful for examining known items — official versions needed for citation purposes after unofficial versions have been retrieved or items it delivers more promptly than the vendors (the *Congressional Record*, for one).

What govinfo *does* do, on the other hand, is shine a better light on what GPO has to offer, even if only by virtue of its more prominent browse pages

and improved search capability. For example, I must confess to not having noticed, pre-govinfo, that slip opinions from selected United States appellate, district, and bankruptcy courts dating back to 2004 are available on the site.⁴ And, here and there, GPO does come up with a resource that contends with what commercial publishers offer. One example is their under-publicized electronic *Code of Federal Regulations* (e-CFR)⁵ which offers browse or search access to a version of the Code that is updated on a daily basis, beating out the private sector counterparts by days. I recommend you give e-CFR a try, next time you are doing federal regulatory research.

So, whether you're away from where your passwords are stored, working on a budget, looking for an item too new for the vendors to have, or merely curious, I recommend you give govinfo a look-over.

Endnotes:

- 1 A Timeline of GPO's History of Providing Online Access to Electronic Government Information. <https://www.govinfo.gov/about/history> [<https://perma.cc/2LA5-2UZG>].
- 2 Meet govinfo, <https://www.govinfo.gov/features/news/meet-govinfo> [<https://perma.cc/ZF4H-VQNR>].
- 3 However, congress.gov (the Library of Congress' recent replacement for its venerable THOMAS website) offers this, to a certain extent.
- 4 Unfortunately, this does not include any of the Virginia district courts, although Sixth Circuit opinions are available.
- 5 <http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/ECFR>



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