



U.S. Department of
Transportation
Office of the Secretary
of Transportation

Memorandum

Subject: Plain Language

Date: April 5, 1999

From: The Secretary *RCS*

Reply to

Attn of:

To: Heads of Operating Administrations
Secretarial Officers

SUMMARY

In response to a recently issued Presidential Memorandum, we will use plain language in all Department of Transportation documents. Each of you must work to ensure that this happens.

BACKGROUND

The President's Memorandum

On June 1, 1998, President Clinton issued a memorandum directing agencies to use plain language in:

- Proposed and final rulemaking documents and
- Other documents that explain how to obtain a benefit or service or how to comply with a requirement that the agency administers or enforces.

(A copy of that memorandum is Attachment 1 to this memorandum.) The President specifically directed that:

- By **October 1, 1998**, we must use plain language in all new documents, other than regulations, that explain how to obtain a benefit or service or how to comply with a requirement we administer or enforce. For example, these documents may include letters, forms, notices, and instructions.

- By **January 1, 2002**, all such documents created prior to October 1, 1998, must also be in plain language.

- By **January 1, 1999**, we must use plain language in all proposed and final rulemaking documents published in the *Federal Register*, unless we proposed the rule before that date.

- To the extent we have the opportunity and resources, we should consider rewriting all existing regulations in plain language.

- We also are expected to use customer feedback and common sense to help us in our effort to achieve plain language.

The Vice President's Memorandum

On July 28, 1998, Vice President Gore sent a memorandum to agencies stressing the importance of complying with the President's June 1 memorandum . He also circulated National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) guidance on the features of plain language and how to implement the President's directive. (Those documents are at Attachment 2.) The NPR Guidance states that:

- By **August 15, 1998**, each agency must designate a senior official responsible for implementing the President's memorandum and representing the agency on the Plain Language Action Network (PLAN), an interagency committee charged with making plain language standard in government communication. Two additional contacts may be designated.

- By **September 4, 1998**, each agency must submit to NPR its plain language action plan, which sets out strategies for:

- Communicating the President's expectations to employees
- Equipping staff with needed tools
- Meeting the deadlines in the memo
- Sustaining change over the long term

The NPR guidance states that the President's memorandum covers all materials we write to our external customers.

DOT ACTION TAKEN

General

DOT has already taken some steps to ensure that we write in plain language. For example, in 1996, the General Counsel's office held a meeting with DOT

rulemaking representatives to discuss our plain language efforts and subsequently invited a consultant who worked with the NPR in the development of its plain language program to speak to the group. A number of our agencies have used that consultant, as well as others over the years, to present plain language training to their employees.

In addition, DOT staff helped develop the President's memorandum and the implementing guidance. Some of our agencies have developed internal guidance documents to help their staffs improve their writing. We have put together a DOT-wide team to work with the Federal Register to simplify its publication format to make reading documents easier. Most importantly, some of our offices already have made a special effort to write or rewrite specific rules in plain language.

The General Counsel's office has sent out several memoranda to help our rulemaking offices implement their responsibilities. These memoranda advised everyone of the President's and the Vice President's memoranda; of an NPR internet site with valuable guidance; of the Vice President's plan to issue "No Gobbledygook" awards; of free workshops that were being offered on plain language; and of the need to alert others in their agencies of their responsibilities for non-rulemaking documents. They also provided a detailed list of plain language resources, including textual material, internet sites, training courses, and plain language organizations; this information should be valuable to everyone in the Department who has a responsibility to use plain language, and an updated copy is at Attachment 3 to this memorandum.

Designation of DOT Representative and DOT Contacts

I have designated the General Counsel, Nancy E. McFadden, to be the DOT senior official responsible for implementing the President's memorandum and representing DOT on PLAN. I have also designated the Executive Secretary, Jamie Williams, to oversee and be our contact for DOT's efforts concerning non-rulemaking documents, and the Assistant General Counsel for Regulation and Enforcement, Neil Eisner, for our rulemaking documents. Within my immediate office, Carrie Hyun, Deputy Chief of Staff, should be kept apprised of this effort.

Plain Language Action Plan

We have also prepared and submitted a Plain Language Action Plan for the Department of Transportation. A copy is at Attachment 4. It briefly describes the action we have taken or will take to implement the President's directive. I want to stress that, because I believe all of our documents should be written in plain language, our Plan is not as limited as the President's memorandum.

ACTION TO BE TAKEN

Designation of Agency Contacts

I want the head of each operating administration to immediately designate one or two individuals to be responsible for implementing the President's directive within your agency. This must be an individual senior enough to ensure that this important initiative is immediately and effectively implemented. These contacts will also be responsible for representing your agency on DOT's Plain Language Committee (PLC). This group will meet with the General Counsel periodically to review our implementation and to determine what other steps we need to take. One of the first issues the PLC needs to address is how the various elements of the Department can pool their resources to offer efficient and effective training, where needed, to help our employees learn the basic principles of good, clear writing.

Regardless of whom you designate as your agency representative, I expect all of you to be personally involved in this important initiative, and the Deputy Secretary and I will ask for periodic progress reports.

Agency Plain Language Action Plan

Each operating administration head should also have a plan developed to demonstrate how the various elements of our department-wide plan will be implemented in his or her agency. Implementation of these plans will be discussed at the periodic meetings of the PLC.

Office of the Secretary Implementation

The Secretarial Officers need to ensure that their staffs are fully aware of their responsibilities with respect to plain language. I also expect you and your staffs to work closely with Nancy to help her with implementation within the Office of the Secretary.

This is not only an important Presidential initiative. It is simply good, common sense. I know that I can count on each of you to ensure its effective implementation. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact Nancy, Jamie, or Neil.

Attachments