



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

July 18, 2019

Mr. Robert Martinez
Director
Environmental Law Division
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
P. O. Box 13087
Austin, Texas 78711-3087

OR2019-19596

Dear Mr. Martinez:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 776127 (TCEQ PIR No.: 19-47045).

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (the "commission") received a request for several categories of information pertaining to an explosion at a specified facility. You state you have released some information. The commission states it will redact e-mail addresses under section 552.137 of the Government Code in accordance with Open Records Decision No. 684 (2009).¹ You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

The commission explains the submitted information consists of Tier Two information that the commission maintains through the Tier Two Chemical Reporting Program, a program implemented in accordance with the federal Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act ("EPCRA") and the Texas right-to-know laws. *See* 42 U.S.C. §§ 11011-11050;

¹Open Records Decision No. 684 serves as a previous determination to all governmental bodies authorizing them to withhold certain categories of information, including personal e-mail addresses under section 552.137 of the Government Code, without the necessity of requesting an attorney general decision. *See* ORD 684.

Health & Safety Code ch. 505-507. As explicitly stated in the federal provisions, the EPCRA does not preempt any state or local law. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 11041(a). Thus, we look to the statutory scheme established under Texas law to determine the disposition of the requested information. Facilities subject to Tier Two chemical reporting requirements must report required data concerning Tier Two chemicals to the commission, the local emergency planning committee, and the local fire chief. Health & Safety Code §§ 505.006(c), (e)-(e-2), 505.0061, 506.006(c)-(d-2), 507.006(c), (e)-(e-2), 507.0061. Sections 505.006(h), 506.006(g), and 507.006(h) provide that all Tier Two reporting documents filed with the commission are subject to the Act. Health & Safety Code §§ 505.006(h), 506.006(g), 507.006(h). Thus, the statutory language makes clear that Tier Two information filed with the commission is subject to all provisions of the Act, including the Act's exceptions. It is this information, that is, information held by the commission as part of the Tier Two Chemical Reporting Program, that we address in this ruling. This ruling does not impact the legal right of citizens to access hazardous chemical information directly from a facility for community right-to-know purposes. *Id.* §§ 505.007(a), 506.007(a). Sections 505.007(b) and 506.007(b) require any facility subject to chapter 505 or chapter 506 of the Health and Safety Code to furnish, upon request, the facility's existing workplace chemical list within ten working days of the date of receipt of a written request. *Id.* §§ 505.007(b), 506.007(b).² Violations of chapter 505, chapter 506, or chapter 507 may be reported to the commission for investigation and possible administrative penalty. *Id.* §§ 505.018, 506.018, 507.014; Water Code §§ 7.052(b-4), .1021, .1851.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. The commission contends some of the submitted information is confidential under section 552.101 in conjunction with sections 418.177, 418.178 and 418.181 of the Government Code. These sections were added to chapter 418 of the Government Code as part of the Texas Homeland Security Act ("HSA"). Section 418.178 provides:

(a) In this section, "explosive weapon" has the meaning assigned by Section 46.01, Penal Code.

(b) Information is confidential if it is information collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental entity and:

(1) is more than likely to assist in the construction or assembly of an explosive weapon or a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapon of mass destruction; or

²Chapter 507 of the Health and Safety Code, which applies to non-manufacturing facilities, does not contain a direct access provision.

(2) indicates the specific location of:

(A) a chemical, biological agent, toxin, or radioactive material that is more than likely to be used in the construction or assembly of such a weapon; or

(B) unpublished information relating to a potential vaccine or to a device that detects biological agents or toxins.

Id. § 418.178. The fact that information may be related to chemical, biological, or radioactive materials does not make such information *per se* confidential under the HSA. See Open Records Decision No. 649 at 3 (1996) (language of confidentiality provision controls scope of its protection). As with any confidentiality statute, a governmental body asserting one of the confidentiality provisions of the HSA must adequately explain how the responsive records fall within the scope of that provision. See Gov't Code § 552.301(e)(1)(A) (governmental body must explain how claimed exception to disclosure applies).

The commission states the submitted Tier Two information is confidential under section 418.178(b) because it reveals information regarding a specified facility that stores hazardous chemicals that are more than likely to assist in the construction or assembly of an explosive or chemical weapon. The commission explains the location of threshold quantities of hazardous substances and extremely hazardous substances at any Texas facility must be reported to the commission under the Tier Two Chemical Reporting Program. Typically, only that information which would reveal the location of these hazardous chemicals is protected under section 418.178(b). However, in this instance, the Tier Two information pertains to a specified facility. Thus, because the location of the facility at issue is already known to this requestor, withholding only that information which would indicate the location of the hazardous chemicals would not effectuate the purpose of section 418.178 and would, in fact, result in the release of confidential information.

We recognize the public's legitimate interest in obtaining information concerning hazardous substances stored in Texas communities. However, we must follow the plain language of section 418.178 which, through its unconditional mandate of confidentiality, does not allow us to take into account the public interest that exists in the release of this information. Thus, we conclude the submitted information is confidential under section 418.178 of the Government Code, and the commission must withhold it under section 552.101 of the Government Code.³ However, as stated above, this ruling does not impact the legal right of citizens to access a facility's existing workplace chemical list directly from any facility covered under chapter 505 or chapter 506 of the Health and Safety Code.

³As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address the commission's remaining arguments against disclosure of this information.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erin Groff". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Erin Groff
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

EMG/jxd

Ref: ID# 776127

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)