



Disaster Response: What to Do with Wet Paper Records

Purpose: Provide guidance to state and local governments on how to minimize damage to records that have gotten wet.

Freeze paper records that have gotten wet.

Freezing wet records helps by:

1. **Stopping Mold and Mildew** – Mold and mildew spores can start to form in the first 8 hours after the records get wet. While freezing the records does not kill existing spores, it keeps them from spreading and prevents further damage as long as the records are kept frozen.
2. **Buying Your Agency Time** – It gives the agency time to plan appropriate next steps for recovery. Depending on the volume, content, and degree of damage to the records, your agency may need to consult its insurer, disaster recovery service providers, Washington State Archives, and/or other parties. Freezing the records allows the agency to make these contacts and determine the best course of action without worrying that the damage is getting worse with each passing moment. It also allows the agency to address the records in portions rather than all at once, identifying those that are a priority for recovery and those that have met their retention and can be destroyed.

Here's how to do it:

1. **Find a Freezer** – Contact **cold storage facilities** or other businesses in your area that can provide **freezer storage (0° F or lower)**.
2. **Pack the Records** – Use **clear, stackable plastic storage containers** large enough to hold a records box. If these are not available or are too expensive, **large clear plastic trash bags** can be used instead. Place each box into a container or bag before you move them, since the wet boxes, binders, or folders may fall apart when you try to pick them up.
3. **Document the Records** – Make a **list** with as much identifying information as you can get quickly about the records being moved into freezer storage (e.g., quantity/volume, records series or type of record, date range, department, location of record, etc.). If the records are labeled and the labels are still legible, you can use a **smartphone or camera** to capture some of this information.

Freezing your wet records will buy your agency crucial time to develop an appropriate recovery strategy, make necessary contacts, and move from crisis mode to recovery mode as quickly as possible.

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from
Washington State Archives:**

**www.sos.wa.gov/archives
recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov**