

Small Business Friendly E-tools for State Regulations

Two states have recently made great progress in creating a user-friendly regulatory environment for small businesses. In the past year, both Colorado and Rhode Island have introduced online programs that send email alerts when a state agency creates or changes a regulation. Both state agencies and small businesses can benefit from these model programs, which make notice requirements less burdensome and allow small businesses to easily keep abreast of important regulatory changes.

Colorado's Reg Alerts Tool.

Colorado Gov. Bill Owens' goal is to make his state's regulators more accountable to the people and to prevent the imposition of needlessly onerous rules and regulations on small business. To tackle this important task, Governor Owens asked his Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA) to create a user-friendly tool to help Coloradans keep abreast of the changing regulatory environment.

Assisted by new legislation that directs state agencies to submit digital copies of proposed rules, DORA was able to create an Internet-based process. This process, nicknamed "Reg Alert," allows any small business owner, trade association, chamber of commerce, or other interested party to go to DORA's website at www.dora.state.co.us/oecrr/ and sign up to receive automatic reg alerts.

When an agency submits a proposed new or amended rule to DORA, individuals who have signed up to receive reg alerts are instantly notified by email. To keep from being swamped by all proposed rules on every subject, recipients may select the areas that interest them from 40 subject categories (natural resources, health care, etc.).

"With a few quick mouse clicks, entrepreneurs can instantly be alert-

ed to any proposed regulation that impacts their business," Rick O'Donnell, executive director of DORA, stated, "without having to hire lawyers or lobbyists to track information for them or wading through dozens of different government agencies' websites."

Each reg alert states the title of the proposed rule and the contact information for the agency submitting the rule. The reg alert also includes the public hearing information, a link to the full text of the new or amended rule, and DORA contact information so small business owners can direct their comments to the responsible agency or to DORA.

For more information, contact Region 8 Advocate Jim Henderson at james.henderson@sba.gov or (303) 844-0503.



From left, Rick O'Donnell, Matt Mayer, and Nancy Lemein of the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies surrounded by Colorado's rules and regulations on the State Capitol steps.

Rhode Island's Rules Tracker.

Rhode Island's Secretary of State's Office instituted its regulatory alert program last summer. When a change in the administrative law required state agencies to file their regulations electronically, the Secretary of State's Information

Technology (IT) division got to work building a program that would allow users to access these rules online. The result is the Rules Tracker program, a completely automated email system.

Small business owners and other interested parties can sign up for Rules Tracker at www.rules.state.ri.us/rules/. The Rules Tracker offers daily, weekly, or monthly updates on agency rules. Rhode Island's initiative also allows individuals to customize their updates by specifying which agency or sub-agency—and even specific keywords—they wish to track. For example, a Rules Tracker user can receive daily news about rules submitted by the Department of Environmental Management's Fish and Wildlife Division that also include the key word "crustacean."

"Nearly 1,000 people have signed up to receive alerts via Rules Tracker," said Jim Willis, director of IT at Rhode Island's Secretary of State's Office. "The most common requests from users are for alerts on health, tax and environmental rules. When one of those agencies promulgates a rule, Rules Tracker sends close to 800 emails to interested parties by the next morning," he said.

The Secretary of State's office has plans to continue improving the technology. In the future, Rules Tracker may be used to post both pending rules and pending bills, and even allow users to comment electronically. And the program is of great interest to states that might be considering creating their own. The Rules Tracker program is an open source program, so the technology can be freely shared with any state interested in implementing a regulatory alerts program.

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