



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

October 10, 2014

Mr. William P. Chesser  
Attorney at Law  
Counsel for the Rising Star Volunteer Fire Department  
P.O. Box 983  
Brownwood, Texas 76804

OR2014-18193

Dear Mr. Chesser:

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# 539828.

The Rising Star Volunteer Fire Department (the "department"), which you represent, received a request for the name of the facility in the department's zip code holding over 10,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate and the chemical inventory list or Tier Two report for that facility. The department claims the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception the department claims and reviewed the submitted information.

We understand the department maintains the submitted information 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; Health & Safety Code §§ 505.001-.017, 506.001-.017, 507.001-.013. 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 Department of State Health Services ("DSHS"), the local emergency planning committee, and the local fire chief. Health & Safety Code §§ 505.006(c), (e), 506.006(c)-(d), 507.006(c), (e). It is this information, that

is, information held by the department 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).<sup>1</sup> Violations of chapter 505, chapter 506, or chapter 507 may be reported to DSHS for investigation and possible administrative penalty. *Id.* §§ 505.010, 506.010, 507.009.

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 department contends the submitted information is confidential under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 418.178 of the Government Code. Section 418.178 was added to chapter 418 of the Government Code as part of the Texas Homeland Security Act and provides as follows:

(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

(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 generally relate to biological toxins does not make the information *per se* confidential under section 418.178. *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 section 418.178 must

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<sup>1</sup>Chapter 507 of the Health and Safety Code, which applies to non-manufacturing facilities, does not contain a direct access provision.

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 department argues the submitted information is confidential under section 418.178(b)(2)(A) because it reveals information regarding a facility that stores hazardous chemicals that are more than likely to assist in the construction or assembly of an explosive weapon. 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. Upon review, we find the information which would indicate the specific location of the facility at issue, which we have marked, is confidential under section 418.178 of the Government Code. Therefore, the department must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 418.178 of the Government Code. 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.

The remaining information does not indicate the specific locations of chemicals that are more than likely to assist in the construction or assembly of an explosive weapon. Further, the department has not explained how section 418.178(b)(1) or section 418.178(b)(2)(B) encompasses any of the remaining information. Accordingly, the department may not withhold any of the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 418.178 of the Government Code.

In summary, the department must withhold the information which would indicate the specific locations of the facility at issue, which we have marked, under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 418.178 of the Government Code. The remaining information must be released. This ruling does not impact the legal right of citizens to access a facility's existing workplace chemical list directly from a facility covered by chapter 505 or chapter 506 of the Health and Safety Code.

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](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,



David L. Wheelus  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

DLW/bhf

Ref: ID# 539828

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)