

Congress of the United States
CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT PANEL

March 7, 2011

The Honorable Timothy F. Geithner
Secretary of the Treasury
United States Department of the Treasury
Room 3300
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the Congressional Oversight Panel, I am writing to express concern about Treasury's handling of the recent redesign of its main website, Treasury.Gov, as well as its website for the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), FinancialStability.Gov. In particular, I am troubled that the redesign has relocated thousands of documents critical to oversight, rendering it difficult – and in some cases even impossible – for oversight bodies, outside experts, or the public to review Treasury's work.

As you are aware, in our monthly oversight reports on the TARP, the Panel relies heavily on official materials published by Treasury. Our reports commonly cite dozens of documents on Treasury's website, including TARP program guidelines, transaction reports, and press releases. In keeping with common government practice, the Panel cites these documents using their Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) on Treasury's website. We intend for these citations to provide outside and future experts with the information needed to verify or expand upon the Panel's work. The continued availability of cited documents represents a meaningful part of the Panel's legacy and an important resource to future policymakers.

Unfortunately, Treasury's redesign of its website has broken nearly a thousand hyperlinks from the Panel's past oversight reports – as well as countless hyperlinks from other oversight bodies, newspaper websites, and other Internet users. Visitors attempting to follow a hyperlink from a past Panel report in order to view, for example, a TARP contract that disbursed billions of taxpayer dollars, or a summary of Treasury's disbursements under TARP to date, will no longer find this critical information. Instead, visitors are redirected to the front page of Treasury's website, which contains no explanation of the redesign and no guidance on how users can proceed to find their requested document. Regrettably, Treasury provided no advance notice to the Panel of its website redesign or the implications for the TARP's transparency.

It is important to note that the accessibility problems posed by a website redesign are well-recognized within the federal government, and the Office of Management and Budget has proposed "best practices" to ensure that redesigns do not improperly obscure

public information. In particular, the Interagency Committee on Government Information issued a 2004 report entitled “Recommended Policies and Guidelines for Federal Public Websites,” which states:

[E]very visitor needs to know about changes to URLs that may affect bookmarks and other links to the website. Since many federal organizations link to each other, it's important to keep URLs current, or provide redirect pages, so content on other federal websites also stays current.... For individual page URL changes, organizations should insert a "redirect" notice that will automatically take visitors to the new URL. When a significant number of page URLs change at one time (for example, as part of a redesign or conversion to an automated content management system), organizations should provide as many ways as possible for visitors to locate the new page locations.

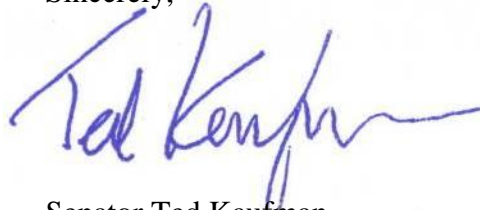
The Panel is troubled that Treasury does not appear to have followed these “best practices” in its recent redesign. Although a small handful of outdated URLs on the Treasury website include a redirect code that points users directly to their requested page, the vast majority of URLs do not; they direct users only to Treasury’s front page.

To Treasury’s credit, your staff has been accessible and helpful to the Panel when we have requested updated URLs for now-outdated hyperlinks. Unfortunately, our staff conversations have revealed that, in many cases, Treasury itself has no readily available record of where old files have been relocated on the new website. Of even greater concern is the fact that Treasury appears to have removed certain documents from its website entirely during the redesign. For example, when the Panel recently requested the updated URL for a TARP contract with GMAC, Treasury responded that “this was an old file that was removed from the [Financial Stability] website” during the redesign. Although Treasury has offered to provide the Panel with copies of all removed or revised documents for our archival purposes, it is concerning that these documents are not otherwise available to the public.

The Panel urges Treasury to consider updating your website to redirect users who attempt to visit outdated URLs to the same information at its new location. If Treasury determines that it is not technically feasible to provide a redirect notice for all outdated URLs, Treasury should provide visitors to those addresses with a clear explanation of the website’s redesign and specific, actionable instructions on how they may find their requested information. Further, the Panel urges Treasury to ensure that all public records that were available on its old website remain available on its new website.

The Panel appreciates that website redesigns are occasionally a necessary and important step in government outreach. Indeed, Treasury deserves credit for creating a new website that is, in general, more accessible and more readily navigable than earlier versions. Even so, Treasury’s steps toward the future must not shroud its past. The TARP provided Treasury the authority to spend a staggering \$700 billion in taxpayer funds, and Americans deserve full and ready access to the information necessary to learn from the TARP’s experience and to judge the program’s legacy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ted Kaufman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Senator Ted Kaufman
Chairman
Congressional Oversight Panel

Cc: Mr. Vivek Kundra,
U.S. Chief Information Officer,
Office of Management & Budget

Mr. Damon Silvers
Mr. J. Mark McWatters
Mr. Richard Neiman
Dr. Kenneth Troske