



## **ELECTRONIC FILING AND ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC FEDERAL COURT DOCUMENTS**

**Practice Advisory<sup>1</sup>**  
March 13, 2026

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This Practice Advisory explains the federal rules authorizing electronic filing in federal court; describes how to file documents in federal court using the Case Management/Electronic Case Files (CM/ECF) System and the Appellate Case Management System (ACMS); outlines how to access electronic documents through Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER); and provides instructions for tracking cases of interest through CM/ECF. The advisory also clarifies some limitations to electronic access of documents in federal immigration cases.

#### **a. Quick Overview of the CM/ECF, ACMS, and PACER Systems**

PACER is a system designed to allow electronic access to U.S. District Court and U.S. Court of Appeals case information. Through PACER, practitioners may access information about current and closed federal cases by entering case specific information such as a party name, case number, or filing date. A person does not have to represent a party in a case to access information through PACER but must maintain a PACER account and pay fees for downloading documents from the PACER site. Information about PACER is available at <http://www.pacer.gov/>.<sup>2</sup> More detailed information about registering for and using PACER is also provided in Part III of this advisory.

CM/ECF is the federal courts' case management and electronic case files system. It allows courts to maintain case documents in electronic form, and it provides the mechanism for filing case documents electronically. With a NextGen CM/ECF account, users now have access to PACER and electronic filing with a single account.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Copyright (c) 2026 American Immigration Council. [Click here for information on reprinting this practice advisory](#). The information in this advisory is accurate and authoritative as of the date of the advisory. Readers are cautioned to check for changes to the rules and other legal developments. This Practice Advisory is written and intended for lawyers and is not a substitute for independent legal advice supplied by a lawyer familiar with a client's case. Erika Acosta and Ilse Ramirez updated this practice advisory, which was last published in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Certain services, such as Court Listener, maintain free versions of records downloaded from PACER. <https://www.courtlistener.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> District courts used to require separate usernames and passwords, but they have all now migrated to NextGen allowing users to utilize their PACER username and password to file.

General information about CM/ECF is available at <https://www.uscourts.gov/court-records/electronic-filing-cm-ecf>. More detailed information about registering for and using CM/ECF is also provided in Part IV of this advisory.

The U.S. Courts of Appeals for the Second and Ninth Circuits currently use ACMS for electronic filing in all new cases. As with CM/ECF, a person must obtain a PACER account in order to register for an ACMS account.<sup>4</sup>

## **II. RULES GOVERNING ELECTRONIC CASE MANAGEMENT AND FILING; PRIVACY AND REMOTE ACCESS**

Individual district courts and courts of appeals have court rules and a general set of procedures, available on individual court websites, that set forth the electronic filing practices of that court.<sup>5</sup> These individual court rules comply with Federal Rules of Civil Procedure (FRCP) and the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure (FRAP) governing electronic filing, privacy requirements, and limitations to remote access of electronic documents. The local court rules can be found on individual court websites. The applicable federal rules are set forth below.

### **a. Electronic Filing, Signatures, and Service**

#### **i. Filing and Signatures**

FRCP Rule 5(d)(3) governs electronic filing in district courts. It states that electronic filing with the court is generally required (for someone represented by an attorney), but paper filing may be allowed for good cause or where allowed/required by local rule. Rule 5(d)(3) also provides that, for purposes of FRCP, a paper filed electronically is the equivalent of a written paper.

All courts of appeals also require electronic filing pursuant to FRAP Rule 25(a)(2)(B). Like FRCP Rule 5(d)(3), FRAP Rule 25(a)(2)(B) states electronic filing with the court is generally required (for someone represented by an attorney), but paper filing may be allowed for good cause or where allowed/required by local rule. For purposes of FRAP, a paper filed by electronic means is the equivalent of a written paper.

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed guidance on using the Appellate Case Management System (ACMS), refer to the instructions provided by the relevant circuit courts. See U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, *Appellate Case Management/Electronic Case Files (ACMS/ECF) System – Filing Instructions*, <https://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/efiling/acms/>; and U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, *ACMS Portal Instructions*, <https://ww3.ca2.uscourts.gov/docs/ACMS%20Portal%20Instructions.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> For a complete list of courts CM/ECF login sites visit <https://www.pacer.gov/cmecf/ecfinfo.html>.

## ii. Service

The Civil and Appellate Rules also permit electronic service of pleadings after the initial complaint.<sup>6</sup> FRCP Rule 5(b)(2)(E) provides that a document may be served electronically through CM/ECF if the person to be served has a CM/ECF account or another electronic means to which the person to be served has consented in writing. However, service is not effective if the serving party learns that it did not reach the person to be served. FRAP Rule 25(c) allows service by electronic means in the courts of appeals with the similar requirement that the person to be served has a CM/ECF or ACMS account or has consented to alternate electronic service in writing. FRAP Rule 25(c) also states that service is not effective if the serving party learns that the electronic document did not reach the person to be served.

## iii. Paper Copies

Though all district courts have electronic filing, particular district courts or individual district court judges may require paper copies of certain electronically filed papers. Attorneys should consult the local rules and the standing orders for the assigned judge.

Courts of appeals may also require paper copies of certain electronic filings. FRAP Rule 31(b) provides that 25 copies of briefs must be filed with the court and 2 copies served on each party, but that this number may be modified by local court rules. All courts of appeals have local rules governing when and whether paper copies of electronically filed briefs must be filed with the court and served on parties.

### **b. Rules Governing Privacy and Limiting Remote Access to Immigration Cases**

Amendments to FRCP Rule 5.2 and FRAP Rule 25(a)(5) implement the privacy provision of § 205 of the E-Government Act of 2002 governing public access to electronic filings in federal court, Pub. L. No. 107-347, 116 Stat. 2899, 2913 (2002), [www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ347/PLAW-107publ347.pdf](http://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ347/PLAW-107publ347.pdf). These amendments became effective on December 1, 2007. FRCP Rule 5.2(c) specifies limits on remote access (unless modified by court order) “in any action or proceeding relating to an order of removal, to relief from removal, or to immigration benefits or detention . . .” See FRCP Rule 5.2 committee’s note—2007, [https://www.law.cornell.edu/rules/frcp/rule\\_5.2](https://www.law.cornell.edu/rules/frcp/rule_5.2) (stating that Rule 5.2 implements the privacy provisions of the E-Government Act, with subdivision (c) limiting remote access to immigration electronic case filings due to “the prevalence of sensitive information in such cases and the volume of filings”).

Only parties and their attorneys may have remote electronic access to all parts of the case file, including the administrative record. Any other person may only have remote access to the docket maintained by the court, and an opinion, order, judgment, or other disposition of the court. However, any person may have electronic access to the full record at the courthouse. FRAP Rule

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<sup>6</sup> Initiating a case and service of a complaint and summons are governed by separate rules not addressed in this practice advisory. See FRCP Rule 4.

25(5) extends the restrictions for immigration cases in FRCP Rule 5.2(c) to immigration appellate cases.

FRCP Rule 5.2(a) also implements privacy provisions of the E-Government Act that require certain information be redacted from documents filed with the court. However, because immigration cases are not accessible by the public, they are not subject to Rule 5.2(a).<sup>7</sup>

### III. ACCESS TO CASE FILINGS

#### a. **Access to Court Documents: The Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) Program**

After completing a registration process, any person may view and retrieve case filings through PACER - an electronic public access system designed by the United States Courts for online access to district court and courts of appeals cases. As mentioned, certain restrictions may limit a person's ability to access documents in immigration cases, but when a document is accessible, PACER allows a person to view, print and download the document.

A PACER account alone does not entitle a person to file documents in a case. As described in Part IV of the advisory, a CM/ECF account is required for electronic filing. For a thorough explanation of PACER features, see the PACER manual, <http://www.pacer.gov/documents/pacermanual.pdf>.

#### b. **PACER Registration and Use; Fees**

##### i. Registration and Use

In order to obtain a PACER login and password, a user must complete the on-line PACER Registration Form, <http://www.pacer.gov/register.html>. PACER now requires attorneys to enroll in Multifactor Authentication (MFA) using an authentication application or tool. Instructions for MFA enrollment are available on the PACER website, <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/help/pacer/multifactor-authentication-mfa-logging>.

Once the registration has been processed, a login and password can be retrieved online. If a firm registers for a Group Billing PACER account, different members of the firm may access

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<sup>7</sup> Rule 5.2(a) requires that, unless the court states otherwise, personal identification information be redacted from documents filed with the court — social-security and taxpayer-identification numbers, birthdates, names of minor children, and financial-account numbers. Rule 5.2(b) provides certain exemptions from the redaction requirement. One of these exemptions is any case that is covered by Rule 5.2(c), the rule limiting the ability of a person to view an electronic document in an immigration case. Therefore, the redaction requirements of Rule 5.2(a) do not apply to immigration cases. However, because filings in immigration cases may still be accessed by the public at courthouses, counsel should consider redacting sensitive information listed in Rule 5.2(a) or as otherwise permitted.

documents. However, if the firm prefers to keep individual billing separate, each PACER user must have a separate account.

After registering for PACER, a person may use different search criteria to locate a case and access documents filed in that case. To locate a particular case, a person must have at least a party name, a case number, or a Nature of Suit (NOS) code.<sup>8</sup> Other fields, such as date range or business name, are optional and are provided to limit a search. A person can also search for cases involving particular parties. Only the last name or entity name is required, but to narrow the search there are many optional fields, including the party role (plaintiff, defendant, attorney, etc.), case type, and date ranges. Explanations of the different criteria used to locate a case may be found in the PACER User Manual, <http://www.pacer.gov/documents/pacermanual.pdf>.

After entering login information and the case-specific information necessary to locate a case, a user may search the desired case docket. To access a particular document, it is necessary to click on the document. The next screen will display information regarding the number of billable pages and the related cost. A user can also click on the bullet next to the document for an abbreviated description of the document before accessing the document and incurring a charge.

## ii. Fees

The U.S. Federal Courts charge user fees for electronic access to case information.<sup>9</sup> However, there is no charge for accessing up to \$30 in charges per quarter (January-March, April-June, July-September, October-December). Each page of a document accessed through PACER costs \$.10. All registered agencies and individuals are charged \$0.10 per page for PACER searches. This includes searches that yield no matches. In addition, audio files generate a \$2.40 per-file charge.

Before incurring a charge to view a document, a user must click on the ‘View Document’ button. The charge for any single document is capped at \$3, or 30 pages. That being said, PACER search results, reports (not case specific), and transcripts are not capped at 30 pages and could therefore, accrue fees greater than \$3.<sup>10</sup> PACER users may enter different client codes during each PACER log-in, and are billed on a quarterly basis for transactions.

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<sup>8</sup> For a list of NOS codes, *see* [www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/nos\\_code\\_descriptions\\_updated\\_v.4\\_12-13-2022\\_0.pdf](http://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/nos_code_descriptions_updated_v.4_12-13-2022_0.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> A party or attorney in a case who registers to file electronically in a district court or court of appeals through the CM/ECF Program, can access a court document one time for free after receiving an EM/ECF filing notice. *See* Part IV of this advisory.

<sup>10</sup> Details on fees may be found at page 4 of the PACER User Manual for CM/ECF Courts, Introduction to PACER – Fees, <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/help/pacer/pacer-user-manual>.

#### IV. ELECTRONIC CASE MANAGEMENT AND FILING

##### a. Electronic Case Management: Overview of the Case Management and Electronic Case Files (CM/ECF) System and the Appellate Case Management System (ACMS)

Federal courts now require electronic filing of most pleadings by represented parties through CM/ECF or ACMS, the federal judiciary's electronic case management systems. CM/ECF and ACMS allow courts to maintain court documents in electronic form, provides access to these documents over the Internet, and provides the mechanism for electronic filing. District courts began implementing CM/ECF in 2002. Courts of appeals began implementing the system in 2004. The U.S. Courts of Appeals for the Second and Ninth Circuit began using ACMS for all new cases in 2023.

##### b. CM/ECF Registration and Use; Electronic Notices; and Fees

###### i. Registration and Use

All district courts now use CM/ECF linked to an individual's own PACER account. All courts of appeals except for the Second and Ninth Circuits also use CM/ECF. A PACER account unique to each attorney must be created and connected to the CM/ECF system in each court. That same account can be maintained if the attorney moves to another place of employment. PACER MFA is required to e-file through CM/ECF.

Generally, in order for an attorney to be authorized to file documents electronically and to receive e-mail notices of documents that are filed, he or she must be admitted to practice in, and registered to file electronically with, the specific court providing the CM/ECF system. Some district courts will also permit attorneys who are admitted *pro hac vice* to file electronically. Other district courts require a separate process for registering for CM/ECF specific to that district after an attorney has been admitted *pro hac vice*. That process may take several days to complete, so users are advised to check the local rules and procedures carefully. Some courts of appeals will permit attorneys who are not admitted to electronically file certain pleadings (such as amicus briefs).

Attorneys should consult the local rules for the relevant court regarding admissions and electronic filing privileges. Centralized attorney admissions and e-filing registration is available for many courts through PACER Manage My Account, <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/my-account-billing/manage-my-account-login>.

The CM/ECF login link for each court can be found on the court's webpage and through PACER, Court CM/ECF Lookup, <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/file-case/court-cmecf-lookup>.

The PACER user ID and password, together with the attorney's typed name in their signature block, will also serve as the lawyer's signature for purposes of filing under FRCP Rule 5(d)(3)(C), FRCP Rule 11(a), and FRAP Rule 25(a)(2)(B)(iii).<sup>11</sup>

ii. Electronic Notice and Fees

After filing a document, an attorney of record will receive by email a Notice of Electronic Filing (NEF) (in district courts) or Notice of Docket Activity (NDA) (in the courts of appeals) with a hyperlink to the filed document. Each attorney of record receives one free "look" at this document and any secondary address listed under the e-mail information screen also receives a free copy. An attorney may also list multiple e-mail addresses for their filer login so that other individuals can be notified of filings. Once a person has accessed a document using the hyperlink in the NEF or NDA, the hyperlink to access the document will redirect users to enter a PACER login and charge a fee to view the document. The first user to access the hyperlink can print or save the document during the initial viewing period in order to avoid future charges. The initial viewing period is 15 days – if after 15 days, the "free look" has not been used via the link included in the NEF or NDA, users will be prompted to login and pay to view the document. For more information about accessing filed documents, see PACER, PACER Pricing: How fees work, <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/pacer-pricing-how-fees-work>.

For help using CM/ECF, visit the website of the court where you intend to file for resources and contact information for electronic filing assistance. You can also visit the PACER Service Center web site at <http://www.pacer.gov/>, send email to the PACER Service Center at [pacer@psc.uscourts.gov](mailto:pacer@psc.uscourts.gov) or call (800) 676-6856 between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. Central Time, Monday-Friday.

c. Appellate Case Management System (ACMS) Registration and Use

The U.S. Courts of Appeals for the Second and Ninth Circuits now use ACMS linked to the attorney's PACER account for new cases. Both courts provide ACMS registration and filing instructions on their webpages.<sup>12</sup>

d. Notices of Cases of Interest

CM/ECF and ACMS permit registered attorneys to receive NEF or NDA for cases on which they are not counsel. Attorneys will need the case number for the case they wish to monitor.

To monitor cases pending at a district court, the attorney should log into the district court's CM/ECF portal and select Utilities/Your Account/Maintain Your E-mail. Click the email address

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<sup>11</sup> PACER, How will signature of documents be handled for documents filed electronically?, <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/help/faqs/how-will-signature-documents-be-handled-documents-filed-electronically>.

<sup>12</sup> The Ninth Circuit's instructions are available here: <https://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/efiling/acms/>. The Second Circuit's instructions are available here: [https://www.ca2.uscourts.gov/filing\\_a\\_document\\_acms.html](https://www.ca2.uscourts.gov/filing_a_document_acms.html).

you wish to receive NEF. Within “Configuration options” enter the case number for the case you wish to monitor under “Case-specific options.”

To monitor cases pending at a court of appeals, the attorney can sign in to the court’s CM/ECF portal and select Utilities/Notice for Cases of Interest. Attorneys can add cases using the correct case number. Similarly, once logged into ACMS, attorneys can add cases to My Cases of Interest.

Note that for cases where FRCP Rule 5.2(c) limits public access to electronically filed documents, attorneys who do not represent the parties may receive NEF or NDA but may not be able to access the filed documents.

## **V. QUICK GUIDE TO HELPFUL SITES**

- PACER Service Center homepage: <http://www.pacer.gov/>
- PACER Contact Us page: <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/contact-us>
- CM/ECF Instructions: <http://www.pacer.gov/cmecf/>
- CM/ECF Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.pacer.gov/psc/efaq.html#CMECF>
- CM/ECF Registration Information: <https://pacer.uscourts.gov/register-account>
- Links to individual district courts where lawyers may access information about registering for CM/ECF: <http://www.pacer.gov/cmecf/ecfinfo.html>
- U.S. Courts Website for complete list of district courts and courts of appeals and their websites: [http://www.uscourts.gov/court\\_locator.aspx](http://www.uscourts.gov/court_locator.aspx)