

# InformationWeek

## Federal Websites: 'Sorry, We're Closed'

**Government shutdown has plunged many federal websites into darkness, leaving visitors without information and skeleton operations vulnerable to hackers.**

By: Elena Malykhina - October 03, 2013

The lights remain off at many federal offices, as furloughed government employees continue to wait for a resolution on day three of the shutdown. Many government websites also have gone dark, with some unavailable altogether, others posting disclaimers that the sites will not be updated.

A sampling of federal websites shows:

-- NASA's main site is unavailable but the public can still access the space agency's mission-specific sites, such as the Jet Propulsion Laboratory Curiosity page and a site dedicated to the International Space Station.

-- Visitors to the Federal Trade Commission's site (FTC) initially see a full-content site, but after a few seconds they're redirected to a shutdown screen that says: "Unfortunately, the FTC is closed due to the government shutdown."

-- The Library of Congress has taken down its main site, but continues to offer access to legislative information sites Thomas.gov and beta.congress.gov.

-- The Department of Agriculture has taken its main sites completely offline.

The government-wide inconsistency depends in part on whether the site is operated in house or by a third party, and the fact that agencies are not required to keep their sites running, unless "necessary to avoid significant damage to the execution of authorized or excepted activities," according to a memo issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on Sept. 17. The memo also states that deciding which services will remain operational is not affected by whether the costs of the shutdown exceed the costs of maintaining services.

If an agency maintains its own website on in-house servers, shutting down makes sense because running the site eats up electricity and bandwidth. For a site like the one managed by the Library of Congress, those costs aren't incidental.

If an outside firm hosts the site, shutting it down for a few days or weeks might not result in savings, research fellow Julian Sanchez wrote in an online post for the Cato Institute, a public policy research organization. "That might indeed explain why some government sites remain operational, even though they don't exactly seem 'essential,' while others have been pulled down," he said.

On the other hand, if agencies have moved their websites to the cloud, "It would make perfect sense for websites to be shuttered. No authorization for the credit card means no compute or storage for your agency," notes Jonathan Feldman, who comments regularly on government and technology for *InformationWeek*.

"Most IT contractors will not see an urgent issue, since many receive monthly, quarterly or annual payments for the IT services they provide," Shawn McCarthy, research director with IDC Government Insights, said in a written statement. "But if the shutdown drags on, defense contractors, especially IT systems integrators, could feel the pinch. Many receive a high percentage of their business from the federal contracts."

Even if government business is delayed, federal requirements for licensing and reporting are still in place, said McCarthy. A shutdown of two or more months could have a much larger impact on IT, but that scenario is highly unlikely.

One potential concern, however, is the risk that idled websites are an invitation to hackers trying to infiltrate agency systems which might not be perfectly sealed off from public-facing websites.

"If I was a wrongdoer looking for an opportunity, I'd contemplate poking at infrastructure when there are fewer people looking at it," Federal CIO Steven VanRoekel said Wednesday in *The Wall Street Journal*.