

New Online Access to Federal Courts

By Lynn Peterson



Are you sick and tired of the hassles, the expense, and the delays involved in retrieving copies from US district and bankruptcy courts? Has searching PACER got you down?

Then, take a look at the Arizona Bankruptcy Court's Web site at <http://ecf.azb.uscourts.gov/>. At this site you can view not only docket sheets, but the documents themselves in PDF format are just a mouse-click away.

Currently there are only three cases available at the site--Nationsway Transport, Boston Chicken, and McCulloch Corp. These cases were selected, as they are all extremely high profile. Access is free and no password is required.

If you have a PACER password you can go to the Arizona Bankruptcy Court's home page at www.azb.uscourts.gov to obtain a read-only password that will enable you to view hundreds of cases that have been made available on the Internet since October 1997.

The Arizona Bankruptcy Court's web site is part of a larger pilot project by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, called ECF (Electronic Case Files) Service. Internet access to case records is currently available in nine federal courts.

The project began in 1996 and enables participating attorneys to submit pleadings and docket entries in PDF format directly to the court. Instant read-only access to the docket and all corresponding documents is available to those with PACER accounts.

Links to the courts that are currently participating in this project are:

Court	General Home Page	ECF Home Page
Arizona Bankruptcy Court	www.azb.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.azb.uscourts.gov/
California Southern Bankruptcy Court	www.casb.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.casb.uscourts.gov/

Georgia Northern Bankruptcy Court	www.ganb.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.ganb.uscourts.gov/
New York Southern Bankruptcy Court	www.nysb.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.nysb.uscourts.gov/
Virginia Eastern Bankruptcy Court	www.vaeb.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.vaeb.uscourts.gov/
Missouri Western District Court	(none)	http://ecf.mowd.uscourts.gov/
New York Eastern District Court	www.nyed.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.nyed.uscourts.gov/
Ohio Northern District Court	www.ohnd.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.ohnd.uscourts.gov/
Oregon District Court	www.ord.uscourts.gov	http://ecf.ord.uscourts.gov/

Gary Bockweg at the US Courts Administrative Office projects that a year from now the initial development and testing will be complete. They plan to bring all of the U.S. district and bankruptcy courts on board, and expect full nationwide implementation in four years.

PACER users pay \$.60 a minute. With Internet access, there is no way to charge by the minute. While currently free, the plan is for ECF users to pay about \$. 07 a page (roughly equivalent to \$.60 a minute).

Today, searching PACER for docket information is usually just the first step. You also have to pay between \$.06 and \$.25 a page for copies, not to mention the cost of postage and Fed Ex. When you add it all up, 7 cents a page will be a bargain.

The privacy issue as it pertains to Internet access to federal court records is still being debated. Some judges take the position that all court documents regarded as public records in hard copy should be made available electronically. Other judges are more cautious and may not want every document available for public view on the Internet. Therefore, they are developing the ability to allow judges to designate certain documents as electronically available, while others can be suppressed. (Filings that are not to be made available simply will not have a hyperlink.)

Electronic availability of the Nationsway case at the Arizona Bankruptcy court is a fine example of public records serving the needs of the public. The Web site will not recover the bounced paychecks of the thousands of Nationsway employees who lost their jobs last month. However, the Web site it is providing them first hand access to information, and information is power.