Numerous agencies have promulgated rules setting forth the policies and procedures they will follow when conducting their informal rulemaking process. They can cover a variety of practices, including processes for initiating and seeking public input on new rules, coordinating with the White House and other agencies as a rule is being formulated, and obtaining approval from agency leadership before a proposed rule is issued or finalized. Agencies refer to these rules by different names. This Recommendation calls them “rules on rulemakings.”

Rules on rulemakings vary—in terms of the particular matters they address, their scope and comprehensiveness, and other characteristics—but they share several common features. First, they authoritatively reflect the agency’s position as to what procedures it will observe when adopting new rules. By “authoritative,” the Recommendation means that a rule on rulemakings sets forth the procedures that agency officials responsible for drafting and finalizing new rules will follow in at least most cases, though it may contemplate the possibility that agency leadership could authorize using an alternative set of procedures.

Second, rules on rulemakings do not simply summarize or explain rulemaking requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act and other statutes, although they often serve an explanatory function at the same time that they set forth the procedures the agencies will

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1 This Recommendation does not address rulemakings subject to the formal hearing requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act. See 5 U.S.C. §§ 556–557.

follow in conducting rulemakings. Rules on rulemakings set forth additional commitments by an agency concerning how it will conduct rulemakings. And third, agencies disseminate rules on rulemakings publicly rather than just internally. They appear on agency websites and are often published not only the Federal Register but also in the version of the Federal Register called the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).

Rules on rulemakings can serve at least four important objectives. First, they promote efficiency by ensuring that both agency officials and those outside the agency know where to go to find the agency’s rulemaking policies. Second, they promote predictability by informing the public that the agency will follow particular procedures, thereby allowing the public to plan their participation in the rulemaking process accordingly. Third, they promote accountability by ensuring that agency leadership has approved the policies and procedures the agency will follow. And they can also provide accountability in connection with individual rulemakings by creating an internal approval process by which agency leadership reviews proposed and final rules. Finally, they promote transparency by affording the public access to the agency’s internal procedures pertaining to its rulemaking process.

In promulgating a rule on rulemakings, an agency may wish to solicit public comment to inform its development, even if it is subject to 5 U.S.C. § 553’s exemption from notice-and-comment procedures as a rule of procedure, general statement of policy, or otherwise. As the Administrative Conference has acknowledged in past recommendations, public comment can both provide valuable input from the public and enhance public acceptance of the agency’s rules.  

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An agency may also wish to publish its rule on rulemakings in the CFR. Doing so can enhance transparency and facilitate accountability. Importantly, publishing a rule on rulemakings in the CFR does not, by itself, make the rule on rulemakings judicially enforceable.\(^4\)

This Recommendation does not address whether, when, or on what legal bases a court might enforce a rule on rulemakings against an agency. As Paragraph 7 below provides, however, an agency that does not wish to be bound by its rule on rulemakings may wish to include a provision in its rule on rulemakings stating that such rules do not create any rights or benefits, substantive or procedural.\(^5\)

Courts should consider such provisions in determining whether to hold rules on rulemakings enforceable. To avoid discouraging agencies from promulgating rules on rulemakings, the courts should give great deference to the agency’s characterization of whether a particular rule on rulemakings is judicially enforceable, only binding on agency staff, merely information on general practices for the public and/or may be waived in particular circumstances.\(^6\)

**RECOMMENDATION**

1. Agencies should consider promulgating rules setting forth the policies and procedures they will follow when conducting their informal rulemaking process (rules on rulemakings).
2. In issuing rules on rulemakings, agencies should consider including provisions addressing the following topics (which reflect topics frequently covered in existing agency rules on rulemakings):

\(^4\) See, e.g., Health Ins. Ass’n of Am., Inc. v. Shalala, 23 F.3d 412, 423 (D.C. Cir. 1994) (stating that “publication in the Code of Federal Regulations, or its absence” is only “a snippet of evidence of agency intent” that the published pronouncement has binding effect).

\(^5\) See, e.g., 49 C.F.R. § 5.23.

\(^6\) See, e.g., Cement Kiln Recycling Coal. v. EPA, 493 F.3d 207, 228 (D.C. Cir. 2007) (“[W]e have previously relied on similar disclaimers as relevant to the conclusion that a guidance document is non-binding.”).
(a) Procedures prior to the issuance of a notice of proposed rulemaking (e.g., regulatory plan processes, advance notices of proposed rulemaking);

(b) Procedures connected with the notice-and-comment process (e.g., materials to be published on Regulations.gov with the notice, minimum comment period to be allowed);

(c) Procedures connected with the presidential review process, if applicable;

(d) Procedures for reassessing existing rules; and

(e) Internal approval procedures for issuing and finalizing rules (e.g., treatment of post-comment period communications).

3. Agencies should make rules on rulemakings available in a prominent, easy-to-find place on the portion of their websites dealing with rulemaking matters. Agencies should use techniques like linked tabs, pull-down menus, indexing, tagging, and sorting tables to ensure that relevant documents are easily findable. Agencies should also design their search engines to allow one to easily identify relevant documents.

4. Agencies should consider, in addition to issuing rules on rulemakings, providing a generalized explanation of how the rulemaking process works without setting forth any procedures that the agency will follow to educate the public. Such explanations might be integrated within a rule on rulemakings itself, or they might be contained in separate explanatory documents (e.g., documents identifying frequently asked questions). When providing such explanations, an agency should, to the extent practicable, distinguish between procedures it intends to follow and material that is provided purely by way of background.

5. Agencies should consider citing their rules on rulemakings in any proposed or final rule that draws upon the procedures contained therein.

6. Agencies should consider seeking public input on rules on rulemakings (whether through notice and comment or some other mechanism), whether or not they are required to do so under the Administrative Procedure Act (5 U.S.C. § 553).
7. If agencies do not wish for their rules on rulemakings to be enforceable in court on judicial review of a rule alleged to have been issued inconsistently with the rule on rulemakings, they should consider including a statement within their rules on rulemakings that such rules do not create any rights or benefits, substantive or procedural.

8. If agencies desire the flexibility to take a different approach than that set forth in the rule on rulemakings, they should consider drafting the rule in such a way that permits officials at a higher level of the agency hierarchy to authorize other officials within the agency to take action that varies from the rule on rulemakings.