

Officials say content may be removed from government websites to satisfy federal accessibility rule

By Ceilidh Kern/North Dakota Monitor

Deadlines are nearing for North Dakota government agencies to bring their websites and mobile apps into compliance with new federal accessibility standards. But some officials say content may need to be removed rather than updated.

In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice announced a new rule requiring state and local governments' websites and apps to comply with accessibility standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Updates could include making content compatible with a screen reader for people with a visual impairment or adding subtitles to videos for people who are hard of hearing.

Governments with a population over 50,000 face an April 24 deadline while smaller governments have until April 2027 to finish necessary updates. If governments don't meet these deadlines, they could be taken to court.

That could reduce transparency, according to Matt Gardner, the executive director of the North Dakota League of Cities.

"To comply with a federal law, the best way to do it is probably to delete portions of your website and remove documents," Gardner said during a Jan. 21 legislative hearing.

"At a time when we want to be more transparent, I could see political subdivisions across the state being less transparent," he added.

The discussion came during a three-day special legislative session. Although the session focused on federal rural health dollars, one bill included a request for \$1.5 million from North Dakota Information Technology to help state agencies update their websites and apps.

The request included money for an "industry standard" tool for scanning websites for accessibility issues, according to Corey Mock, NDI's chief information officer.

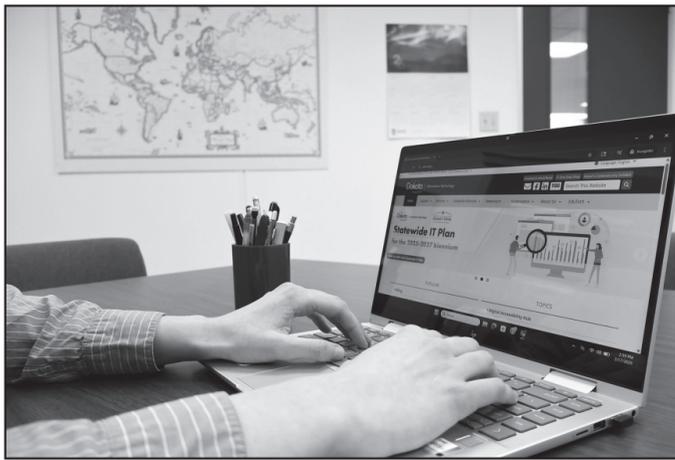
During his testimony, Gardner asked lawmakers for \$500,000 for a cost-sharing program to help smaller governments buy into the state's contract for the tool.

Lawmakers approved the state agency's funding request and the League of Cities' request to allow local governments to buy into the contract, but the bill didn't include money to help cities and counties cover the cost.

Gardner said in an interview after the special session that cities may have to look for free resources to comply with the federal requirement.

"When you think of a very small community, I mean, their entire property tax collection may be \$14,000. They have very limited resources to buy into a state contract," Gardner told the Monitor.

That could impact government transparency, particularly for



Government agencies have upcoming deadlines to bring websites and mobile apps into compliance with new federal accessibility standards. Photo by Michael Achterling/North Dakota Monitor

complex, externally produced content, such as financial audit reports or engineering firms' project designs, which officials could opt to remove rather than update, Gardner said.

At the hearing, Sen. Brad Bekkedahl, a Republican from Williston and the chairman of the Joint Appropriations Committee, told Gardner that if cities are concerned about liability, he would encourage them to pull down content.

"If it's that big of a liability issue, that's what I'd recommend my city to do," said Bekkedahl, who is also a Williston city commissioner. "Is it detrimental to citizens? Absolutely. But this is a federal mandate. We didn't bring this on ourselves."

Mock told the committee that for state agencies, online content is being triaged, with the most critical content — such as applications or information about services — being updated first. As the deadline approaches, less critical information could be temporarily removed and republished later.

According to the DOJ website, older content that was posted to a government's website or app before the compliance deadline is most likely exempt if it's in a "word processing, presentation, PDF or spreadsheet file" format.

Additionally, content stored in an explicitly labeled "archive" section of a website will be considered exempt if it was created before the compliance deadline and is kept only for reference or recordkeeping.

Asked whether content had been removed permanently from agencies' sites because it would have taken too many resources or too much time to update, Mock replied, "Not that anyone on our team is aware of."

Older content, meanwhile, will be archived on state agencies' websites, where it will still be accessible to the public.

In Fargo, nothing has been removed from the city's website because of accessibility compliance efforts, according to Ron Gronneberg, the city's chief information officer.

"There was a clause in (the rule) that grandfathered-in stuff, so I don't anticipate us removing anything that's old," he said. "I think we're in compliance with the old stuff."

But in Bismarck, the city's efforts

to update its website have involved taking down outdated content, according to Kalen Ost, a communication strategist who has been involved with the city's digital accessibility efforts. He said it's also part of the city's normal site management.

If information on a page is outdated or conflicts with newer content, it may be deleted or combined with other pages, he said.

But the city retains files such as PDFs and Word documents offline, where they can be accessed through a records request, and meeting minutes and agendas are in another module and don't "ever really get messed with," he said.

While small towns don't have to worry about updating some of their older content, they may be hesitant to upload things to their websites in the future, according to Gardner.

"Websites will keep their base: hours of operation, 'here is where you can pay your water bill,' and some of those basics," he told the Monitor. "(That's) maybe what these websites turn into."

Media attorney Jack McDonald said the situation demonstrates the downside of governments pushing to publish public notices on their websites instead of in newspapers.

"The answer is always, 'Well, we can put it on our website. That's a lot cheaper and easier.' And the answer (to that) is, 'Yeah, but how long is that going to be on the website?'" McDonald said.

The website NDPublicNotices.com, run by the North Dakota Newspaper Association, provides a backstop thanks to its "huge repository" of public notices and meeting minutes from the past 15 years, said Executive Director Cecile Wehrman.

"Those minutes will not disappear from the public record," she said.

Ceilidh Kern is a freelance journalist based in Fargo-Moorhead. Before moving to the Red River Valley, Ceilidh covered state government, environment and other beats for outlets across Missouri.

Editor's note: Valley News and Views will continue to follow up with local city and county officials as the 2027 deadline approaches on how these new rules will affect readers.

the Harvest Information Program prior to hunting in each state. The HIP number obtained for North Dakota's spring conservation order is also valid for North Dakota's fall hunting season. The number can be obtained online on the Game and Fish website.

The spring conservation order is only open to light geese – snows, blues and Ross's. Species identification is important because white-fronted and Canada geese travel with light geese. The conservation order is closed to whitefronts, Canada geese, swans and all other migratory birds.

North Dakota Stockmen's Foundation adds, enhances 2026 scholarship offerings

The North Dakota Stockmen's Foundation (NDSF) is bolstering its scholarship offerings for 2026. At its last quarterly meeting, the NDSF Board of Directors voted to increase the value of six of its scholarships and add two new ones, for a total of 12 to be distributed this year.

"The Stockmen's Foundation highly values education and considers the scholarships it provides as direct investments in the beef industry's future leadership, innovation and success," explained NDSF President Jason Leiseth, an Arnegard, N.D., cow-calf producer. "The organization aims to provide hope and opportunity in this generation and the next, and it is our hope that these scholarships will help foster passionate youth, ensure a knowledgeable and skilled talent pipeline and support the long-term viability of the cattle business."

The application deadline for the NDSF scholarships is March 1. Downloadable and fillable application forms can be found at www.ndstockmen.org/foundation.

The 2026 offering will include the following:

Endowment Scholarship

The NDSF Endowment Scholarship will be given to a student majoring in animal science, range science, pre-vet, agribusiness, ag communications, farm and ranch management or another beef-related discipline at a North Dakota college or university. It is now valued at \$750.

Legacy Scholarships

NDSF Legacy Scholarships will be given to seven students who are

studying any discipline and who are interested in the livestock industry. Five Legacy Scholarships are now valued at \$750 each, while two new Legacy Scholarships are valued at \$1,000 each.

Jack and Vander Reich Memorial Scholarship

The NDSF Jack and Vander Reich Memorial Endowment Scholarship will be given to a student preparing to study an agricultural major. It honors the memory of the late Jack and Vander Reich of Zap, N.D. Preference may be given to applicants with an interest in rodeo and/or shooting sports. It is valued at \$750.

Tokach Angus Ranch Memorial Scholarship

The NDSF Tokach Angus Ranch Memorial Scholarship will be given to a student majoring in animal science, range science, pre-vet, agribusiness, ag communications, farm and ranch management or another beef-related discipline. It honors the memory of the late Richard M. Tokach of St. Anthony, N.D. Preference will be given to students who have completed their bachelor's degree and are pursuing a graduate education or professional school. The scholarship is valued at \$1,000.

Myron Wold Memorial Endowment Scholarships

Two NDSF Myron Wold Memorial Endowment Scholarships will be given to students preparing to study an agricultural major. The scholarships honor the memory of the late Myron Wold of Watford City, N.D. Each is valued at \$1,000.

New food guidelines take a bite out of public schools

Schools may scramble to measure up

By Michael Standaert/North Dakota News Cooperative

New federal efforts to limit processed food and encourage the consumption of whole foods will impact school budgets, staffing and menu options for K-12 kids over the coming years across North Dakota.

Some policies, like reducing the amount of sugar, are already being rolled out, while longer-term goals for increasing protein and healthy fats are expected in the near future.

While the aim of the new guidelines is to improve the overall health of Americans who follow them, any programs getting federal assistance are the only ones required by law to adopt. That includes K-12 students, military, childcare, hospitals and others.

One of the biggest challenges will be the shift away from entrenched eating patterns developed over the past four-odd decades. Those habits became reliant on cheaper, convenient and often heavily processed food packed with sugars and carbohydrates.

This abrupt shift away from carbohydrates and the food systems built to support them will likely lead to increased costs due to challenges of changing supply chains, a need for upping staff numbers, and retrofitting kitchens to boost their ability to make more whole foods on site.

Lynelle Johnson, state director of child nutrition and food distribution at the Department of Public Instruction, said it will likely take some time for the latest changes to impact K-12 schools, but those changes are coming.

"They did say this would be expedited," Johnson said of the new rules.

Schools across the state are currently implementing limits on added sugars in products like milk, cereal and yogurt, stemming from the 2020-2025 guidelines, with those expected to be finalized by the end of this year.

Requirements that limit sugar to no more than 10% of calories in a weekly school menu, as well as

reductions in overall sodium content, are next and set to be implemented through the end of 2028.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture sets the Child Nutrition Program guidelines based on the latest Food and Drug Administration dietary guidelines but has provided schools little direction on compliance.

"USDA has given us zero guidance on how we're going to monitor this," Johnson said. "How we're going to review that is unknown."

Companies are leading the charge in the changes she said, reformulating their products so they can still sell to schools and other institutions.

"If you see Trix or Cocoa Puffs in a school, that is a specially formulated cereal for school," Johnson said. "If you see it in the grocery store, compared to what's in a school, they're not the same. Even a Ritz cracker in a school is whole grain, where in a grocery store it is not."

The changes have taxed supply chains, she said.

"Manufacturers have said, if you mess with this too much, we're out of K-12 (food), we're done."

A brief history

Before the most recent guidelines announced in early January by Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy and USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins, nine other iterations were developed starting from 1980.

By the 1990s, the "Food Pyramid" recommended around 6-11 servings of carbohydrates from bread, cereal, rice and pasta to form the base, with fruits (2-4) and vegetables (3-5) in the middle, followed by dairy (2-3), plus meats or other proteins (2-3) toward the narrow top. Oils and fats were recommended only sparingly.

The latest pyramid flipped to almost the exact opposite of that 1990 version. Protein - now recommended at about double the previous Food and Drug

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Spring Light Goose conservation order

North Dakota's spring light goose conservation order opened Feb. 21 and continues through May 10.

Residents must have a 2025-26 (valid through March 31) or 2026-27 (required April 1) combination license; or a small game, and general game and habitat license. Resident youth under age 16 only need the general game and habitat license. The 2026-27 license is available for purchase beginning March 15. In addition, all hunters need an electronic waterfowl restoration stamp.

Nonresidents need a 2026 spring light goose conservation order license. The cost is \$50 and valid statewide. Nonresidents who hunt in spring remain eligible to buy a fall season license. The

spring license does not count against the 14-day fall waterfowl hunting season regulation.

Nonresident youth under 16 can purchase a license at the resident fee. A federal duck stamp is not required for either residents or nonresidents. Yet, like resident hunters, nonresidents also need an electronic waterfowl restoration stamp.

Resident and nonresident licenses are available online at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

Hunters must register annually with