

# Jefferson, Crook courts to digitize case records

By Lauren Dake  
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Jefferson and Crook County Circuit Courts have been picked to be part of a pilot program that state officials hope will change the way the state's courts do business.

The Oregon Judicial Department is working to gravitate away from a paper-based system and start digitizing all types of court records. Called Oregon eCourt, state officials said the program will transform the way the court system interacts with citizens. Still in its early stages, five counties have been selected to test the program. The counties, including Crook and Jefferson, will launch the program in the summer of 2011 with civil and small claims cases. Starting this spring, court officials will start scanning current information so it will be available digitally. Criminal cases will not be available digitally as soon.

"When fully implemented it will allow us to better serve the public," said Phil Lemman, spokesman for Oregon Judicial Department.

People will be able to file documents, pay fines and view court cases online.

For Amy Bonkosky, who is the trial court administrator for both Crook and Jefferson County Circuit Courts, it will mean she no longer has to pile up court files in her car to transfer between Crook and Jefferson counties.

"It has several benefits," she said. "There will be continuity with our records ... If there were a fire or flood, they are protected, that's a benefit. They will take up less storage. And more than one person at a time can look at a file."

Several judges hear cases in both Jefferson and Crook counties.

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"A judge will have files waiting for him in Prineville he needs to address and generally can't until he goes back to Prineville," she said. "Once those are scanned in, a judge can sit at his desk in Madras and pull up files in Prineville, read the pleadings and address anything he needs to."

The court documents would be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Lemman said the state is still working on how complex criminal cases would be filed and how to ensure the public's privacy.

"It's the canary in the coal mine, we're looking for problems

and making sure it works," Lemman said. "We're stepping in the shallow end, before the deep end."

Lemman said small counties were picked to pilot the program, since caseloads are usually smaller.

Access to the information would be similar to how it works now. If a file is sealed, it won't matter if it's digital. If a person is party to the case, they could have more access to the information than someone in the public. The information is not on the World Wide Web and he said people will most likely need to know what they are looking for to find it — similar to the current paper system.

"The point is to improve access

to information ... but if I want to Google your name and find out how many countries you've been sued in, we're not dumping it all on the Internet. That's not the kind of system we're setting up."

For the 2009-11 biennium, the Legislature approved \$20.3 million to fund eCourt.

The main goal, Lemman said, is simple.

"A year from now, my hope is rather than walking the lawsuit to the courthouse, I can e-mail it," he said.

"We're catching the court system up to the 21st Century," he said.

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