

119TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 4145

To amend title 17, United States Code, to reaffirm the importance of, and include requirements for, works incorporated by reference into law, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 19, 2026

Mr. COONS (for himself, Mr. CORNYN, Ms. HIRONO, and Mr. TILLIS) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on the Judiciary

A BILL

To amend title 17, United States Code, to reaffirm the importance of, and include requirements for, works incorporated by reference into law, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Protecting and En-
5 hancing Public Access to Codes Act of 2026” or the “Pro
6 Codes Act of 2026”.

7 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

8 Congress finds the following:

1 (1) Congress, the executive branch, and State
2 and local governments have long recognized that the
3 people of the United States benefit greatly from the
4 work of private standards development organizations
5 with expertise in highly specialized areas.

6 (2) The organizations described in paragraph
7 (1) create technical standards and voluntary con-
8 sensus standards through a process requiring open-
9 ness, balance, consensus, and due process to ensure
10 all interested parties have an opportunity to partici-
11 pate in standards development.

12 (3) The standards that result from the process
13 described in paragraph (2) are used by private in-
14 dustry, academia, the Federal Government, and
15 State and local governments that incorporate those
16 standards by reference into laws and regulations.

17 (4) The standards described in paragraph (3)
18 further innovation, commerce, and public safety, all
19 without cost to governments or taxpayers because
20 standards development organizations fund the proc-
21 ess described in paragraph (2) through the sale and
22 licensing of their standards.

23 (5) Congress and the executive branch have re-
24 peatedly declared that, wherever possible, govern-
25 ments should rely on voluntary consensus standards

1 and have set forth policies and procedures by which
2 those standards are incorporated by reference into
3 laws and regulations and that balance the interests
4 of access with protection for copyright.

5 (6) Circular A-119 of the Office of Manage-
6 ment and Budget entitled “Federal Participation in
7 the Development and Use of Voluntary Consensus
8 Standards and in Conformity Assessment Activi-
9 ties”, issued in revised form on January 27, 2016,
10 recognizes the benefits of voluntary consensus stand-
11 ards and incorporation by reference, stating that
12 “[i]f a standard is used and published in an agency
13 document, your agency must observe and protect the
14 rights of the copyright holder and meet any other
15 similar obligations.”.

16 (7) Federal agencies have relied extensively on
17 the incorporation by reference system to leverage the
18 value of technical standards and voluntary consensus
19 standards for the benefit of the public, resulting in
20 more than 23,000 sections in the Code of Federal
21 Regulations that incorporate by reference technical
22 and voluntary consensus standards.

23 (8) State and local governments have also rec-
24 ognized that technical standards and voluntary con-
25 sensus standards are critical to protecting public

1 health and safety, which has resulted in many such
2 governments—

3 (A) incorporating those standards by ref-
4 erence into their laws and regulations; or

5 (B) entering into license agreements with
6 standards development organizations to use the
7 standards created by those organizations.

8 (9) Standards development organizations rely
9 on copyright protection to generate the revenues
10 necessary to fund the voluntary consensus process
11 and to continue creating and updating these impor-
12 tant standards.

13 (10) The people of the United States have a
14 strong interest in—

15 (A) ensuring that standards development
16 organizations continue to utilize a voluntary
17 consensus process—

18 (i) in which all interested parties can
19 participate; and

20 (ii) that continues to create and up-
21 date standards in a timely manner to—

22 (I) account for technological ad-
23 vances;

24 (II) address new threats to public
25 health and safety; and

1 (III) improve the usefulness of
2 those standards; and

3 (B) the provision of access that allows peo-
4 ple to read technical and voluntary consensus
5 standards that are incorporated by reference
6 into laws and regulations.

7 (11) As of the date of enactment of this Act,
8 many standards development organizations make
9 their standards available to the public free of charge
10 online in a manner that does not substantially dis-
11 rupt the ability of those organizations to earn rev-
12 enue from the industries and professionals that pur-
13 chase copies and subscription-access to those stand-
14 ards (such as through read-only access), which en-
15 sures that the public may read the current, accurate
16 version of such a standard without significantly
17 interfering with the revenue model that has long
18 supported those organizations and their creation of,
19 and investment in, new standards.

20 (12) Through this Act, and the amendments
21 made by this Act, Congress intends to balance the
22 goals of furthering the creation of standards and en-
23 suring public access to standards that are incor-
24 porated by reference into law or regulation.

1 **SEC. 3. WORKS INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE INTO LAW.**

2 (a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 1 of title 17, United
3 States Code, is amended by adding at the end the fol-
4 lowing:

5 **“§ 123. Works incorporated by reference into law**

6 “(a) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

7 “(1) CIRCULAR A-119.—The term ‘Circular A-
8 119’ means Circular A-119 of the Office of Manage-
9 ment and Budget entitled ‘Federal Participation in
10 the Development and Use of Voluntary Consensus
11 Standards and in Conformity Assessment Activities’,
12 issued in revised form on January 27, 2016.

13 “(2) INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE.—

14 “(A) IN GENERAL.—The term ‘incor-
15 porated by reference’ means, with respect to a
16 standard, that the text of a Federal, State,
17 local, or municipal law or regulation—

18 “(i) references all or part of the
19 standard; and

20 “(ii) does not copy the text of that
21 standard directly into that law or regula-
22 tion.

23 “(B) APPLICATION.—The creation or pub-
24 lication of a work that includes both the text of
25 a law or regulation and all or part of a stand-
26 ard that has been incorporated by reference, as

described in subparagraph (A), shall not affect the status of the standard as incorporated by reference under that subparagraph.

“(3) PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE ONLINE.—

“(A) IN GENERAL.—The term ‘publicly accessible online’, with respect to material, means that the material is displayed for review in a readily accessible manner on a public website that conforms with the accessibility requirements of section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794d), including the regulations implementing that section as set forth in part 1194 of title 36, Code of Federal Regulations, or any successor regulations.

“(B) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION.—If a user is required to create an account or agree to the terms of service of a website or organization in order to access material online, that requirement shall not be construed to render the material not publicly accessible online for the purposes of subparagraph (A), if—

“(i) there is no monetary cost to the user to access that material; and

“(ii) no personally identifiable information collected pursuant to such a re-

1 quirement is used without the affirmative
2 and express consent of the user.

3 “(4) STANDARD.—The term ‘standard’ means a
4 standard or code that is—

5 “(A) a technical standard, as that term is
6 defined in section 12(d) of the National Tech-
7 nology Transfer and Advancement Act of 1995
8 (15 U.S.C. 272 note); or

9 “(B) a voluntary consensus standard, as
10 that term is used for the purposes of Circular
11 A–119.

12 “(5) STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZA-
13 TION.—The term ‘standards development organiza-
14 tion’ means a holder of a copyright under this title
15 that plans, develops, establishes, or coordinates vol-
16 untary consensus standards using procedures that
17 incorporate the attributes of openness, balance of in-
18 terests, due process, an appeals process, and con-
19 sensus in a manner consistent with the requirements
20 of Circular A–119.

21 “(b) STANDARDS INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE
22 INTO LAW OR REGULATION.—A standard to which copy-
23 right protection subsists under section 102(a) at the time
24 of its fixation shall retain such protection, notwithstanding
25 that the standard is incorporated by reference, if the appli-

1 cable standards development organization, within a rea-
 2 sonable period of time after obtaining actual or construc-
 3 tive notice that the standard has been incorporated by ref-
 4 erence, makes all portions of the standard so incorporated
 5 publicly accessible online at no monetary cost and in a
 6 format that includes a searchable table of contents and
 7 index, or equivalent aids to facilitate the location of spe-
 8 cific content.

9 “(c) BURDEN OF PROOF.—In any proceeding in
 10 which a party asserts that a standards development orga-
 11 nization has failed to comply with the requirements under
 12 subsection (b) for retaining copyright protection with re-
 13 spect to a standard, the burden of proof shall be on the
 14 party making that assertion to prove that the standards
 15 development organization has failed to comply with those
 16 requirements.”.

17 (b) TECHNICAL AND CONFORMING AMENDMENT.—
 18 The table of sections for chapter 1 of title 17, United
 19 States Code, is amended by adding at the end the fol-
 20 lowing:

“123. Works incorporated by reference into law.”.

