

Auditing Automated License Plate Readers

How to find out what surveillance cameras your county has bought, who is searching them, and what to do with the answer.

This guide assumes nothing.

You do not need a lawyer, a law degree, a filing fee, or a stated reason. In most states any resident can request these records in writing and the agency must respond. Everything in this guide is lawful, public, and has already worked in real jurisdictions.

The single most important thing on these pages: **request the records by their exact product names**. They are one-click exports from the agency's own dashboard. Naming them correctly defeats the two most common brush-offs — “we don't have that” and “that's too burdensome.”

What an ALPR actually captures. An automated license plate reader photographs every vehicle that passes it — not suspects, everyone. Modern systems record the plate plus a vehicle “fingerprint”: make, model, color, roof racks, bumper stickers, damage. Each read is stamped with time and location. Individually a read is trivial. Aggregated across a network, the reads become a map of where you go, when, how often, and with whom.

Why the audit matters more than the argument. Courts have largely upheld ALPRs on the reasoning that a car on a public road has no expectation of privacy. Arguing the constitutional question in a county meeting will lose. Producing your own county's search log and reading it aloud will not. Inventory, audit, and contract are the ground where this is actually decided.

Time-sensitive

Camera data is deleted on a rolling basis — commonly 30 days by default, and some states now mandate less. Search logs generally persist longer than footage, but do not assume it. File early, request expedited processing, and ask for a specific date range so the agency cannot claim burden.

STEP 1 Find out what is deployed

Before you ask for records, know what you are asking about. Three sources, in order of effort:

- **Public camera maps.** DeFlock.me is a crowdsourced, open-source map of ALPR locations nationwide. Search your county. It is incomplete by design — volunteers submit entries — so treat it as a starting inventory, not a final count.

- **Your own eyes.** These devices sit on poles along public roads. Photographing publicly visible infrastructure from a public place is lawful. Log GPS coordinates, direction faced, and pole markings. Note whether a camera sits on a public right-of-way or on private property — a mall, an HOA, a distribution center. Private cameras often join the same network with no public process whatsoever.
- **Budget and agenda records.** Search your county commission and city council minutes for the vendor name. Frequently there is nothing — and that absence is itself a finding worth reporting.

The free-trial problem

Many systems arrive as a no-cost pilot or a donation, which is exactly how they bypass procurement review and public hearings. Ask two questions: does your county have a gift or donation acceptance policy requiring a board vote, and was it followed? A donated system is still the acquisition of a public asset creating a public record.

STEP 2 File the records request

This is the core of the guide. Request these records **by name**. In the most widely deployed system, all four download as CSV files from the agency's own administrative dashboard.

Record	What it shows	Why it matters
Organization Audit (Insights tab)	Searches run by the agency's own operators. Fields include operator name, license plate searched, reason, case number, search time, and filters.	Shows whether searches are tied to real cases — or to nothing at all.
Network Audit (Insights tab)	Searches run by <i>other agencies</i> that reached your cameras through data-sharing settings. An agency in one state running a nationwide search appears in the network log of agencies in every other state.	The most important file. It answers the question no sheriff can answer from memory: who outside this county has searched our cameras.
Shared Networks (config export)	A snapshot of which agencies your agency shares data with, and which share back. This is configuration, not activity.	Reveals the reach of the network your county silently joined.
Event Log	System-level events and administrative changes.	Shows setting changes — including retention and sharing changes.

Also request: the contract, quote, or trial agreement and all amendments; the written ALPR use policy (many agencies have none — get that in writing); the retention setting; the hot-list sources; and any records of federal agency access or pilot programs.

Ask for original machine-readable format. Specify CSV or spreadsheet files. A PDF screenshot of a spreadsheet is a refusal wearing a costume.

STEP 3 Read what comes back

An audit log is only as good as the questions you bring to it. Work through these in order:

- **Volume against population.** Total searches divided by county residents. This single ratio ends more meetings than any argument about rights.
- **Empty and junk reason fields.** What percentage of searches have a blank reason, or a one-word entry like “investigation”? A free-text field with no validation is not an accountability control.
- **Searches with no case number.** A query untethered to a case file is a query nobody can justify after the fact.
- **Out-of-state and federal agencies** in the Network Audit. Name them. Ask your sheriff whether he knew.
- **Reason-field keyword scan.** Search the text for terms referencing protests, religious gatherings, journalists, political organizing, immigration enforcement, or medical care. This is where misuse becomes visible in the agency's own words.
- **Repeat searches on the same plate** by the same operator over time — the signature of personal rather than official use.

What one search does not mean

A logged search means an operator queried the database for a plate. It does not mean the person was stopped, investigated, or suspected of anything — and the operator is not necessarily a sworn officer. Be precise about this when you publish. Overstating a single record will cost you the credibility you need for the pattern.

STEP 4 Expect obstruction, and answer it

“Use the Transparency Portal instead.” Do not accept this. Portal audits are a heavily reduced product — typically search date, camera count, and reason, with anonymous user identifiers rather than operator names. The vendor markets the portal publicly as an accountability tool; in at least one sales communication to a customer the company described its public search audit as offering the public nothing. Request the Organization and Network Audits by name and cite that they export directly from the Insights tab.

“That's the vendor's data, not ours.” Records maintained by a contractor on the agency's behalf are generally responsive to a public records request in most states. State this in the request itself.

Redaction and truncation. Expect partially obscured logs. Operator names are often truncated to fragments, and the same event may be logged inconsistently between agencies. Where redactions are applied, demand the specific statutory exemption in writing for each withholding, and request the remainder of the record.

Fees. Ask for a fee waiver on public-interest grounds and state that the records will be made available to the public and that the request is not commercial. If the estimate is still high, narrow the date range and file a 30-day sample first. A produced sample beats a denied three-year request every time.

If denied. Every state has an appeal path — frequently a petition to the district attorney or attorney general. Look up your state's statute number and cite it in the original request; agencies respond differently when the

deadline is quoted back to them.

STEP 5 **Bring it to the board**

The records are the argument. Structure the presentation this way:

- **Lead with the log, not the principle.** Read the numbers. Total searches. Blank reason percentage. The list of out-of-state agencies.
 - **Ask questions the board cannot answer.** Who approved this. Where is the use policy. Who audits it. When does the contract renew. Which outside agencies can query our data.
 - **Target the renewal, not the removal.** Asking a board to rip out installed cameras triggers defensiveness. Asking them to attach conditions to the *next* renewal — audit publication, sharing restrictions, retention limits, a sunset date — succeeds far more often.
 - **Coordinate across counties.** Same date range, neighboring jurisdictions, filed the same week. Cross-jurisdictional patterns are invisible in any single county's log.
 - **Publish what you get.** Several projects aggregate released logs. A record sitting in your inbox helps no one.
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Ground Rules

Do not touch the cameras.

Camera destruction has occurred in multiple states. It is a crime, it is unnecessary, and it is strategically self-defeating: it hands the industry the framing it wants, in which people asking questions are dangerous rather than curious. The public records request is the method that has actually cost vendors contracts and forced program cancellations. Vandalism has cost them nothing and funds their next argument.

Verify before you publish.

Read the fields carefully, understand what each column means, and describe records precisely. One overstated claim will be used to discredit everything else you produce.

File as a group.

Multiple residents filing the same request is harder to slow-walk than one person filing alone, and it distributes the cost if fees are assessed.

Where to Get Help

- **DeFlock.me** — crowdsourced national map of ALPR camera locations.
- **Have I Been Flocked (haveibeenflocked.com)** — aggregates audit logs released through public records requests and lets you search for your own plate.
- **MuckRock** — files public records requests on your behalf and publishes both the request and the response. Existing ALPR requests there can be copied as models.

- **flock-public-records-toolkit** (GitHub) — generates requests with state-specific statutory citations for more than twenty states.
- **EFF Atlas of Surveillance** — database of surveillance technology by agency.
- **Your state's press association or open-government coalition** — most publish a plain-English guide to the state records statute and will answer questions from residents, not just journalists.

Copy-and-Paste Request

Replace the bracketed fields. Send by email to the agency's designated records custodian — usually listed on the agency website under “public records” — and keep a copy of the sent message with its timestamp.

To: [Records Custodian], [Agency Name]

Re: Public Records Request – Automated License Plate Reader Records

Pursuant to [STATE PUBLIC RECORDS STATUTE, e.g. ORS 192.311-192.478], I request copies of the following records concerning the agency's automated license plate reader (ALPR) system:

1. The Organization Audit report, covering [START DATE] through the date this request is processed.
2. The Network Audit report, covering the same period, reflecting searches of this agency's ALPR data conducted by any other agency.
3. A list of network share settings, including networks shared with this agency and networks this agency shares outward.
4. The system Event Log for the same period.
5. All contracts, quotes, trial agreements, amendments, intergovernmental agreements, and purchase orders relating to ALPR products or services.
6. All written policies, procedures, or guidelines – draft or final – governing ALPR installation, operation, access, retention, sharing, or deletion.
7. All records reflecting access to this agency's ALPR data by any federal agency, including pilot programs and data-sharing arrangements.
8. Minutes, agendas, and presentations from any public meeting at which ALPR acquisition or use was discussed.

Please provide records in their original electronic, machine-readable format (CSV or spreadsheet) where applicable. Records maintained by a vendor on the agency's behalf are responsive to this request.

I request expedited processing, as ALPR data is subject to short automatic deletion periods.

These records will be made available to the general public and this request is not made for commercial purposes. I therefore request a waiver or reduction of fees. If fees will exceed [\$ AMOUNT], please contact me before proceeding.

If any portion is withheld, please cite the specific statutory exemption for each withholding and produce the remainder.

Please acknowledge receipt and respond within the time required by [STATE STATUTE].

[Your Name]

[Contact Information]

[Date]

One line to add if you get stonewalled

"The Organization Audit and Network Audit reports are available to agency administrators under the Insights tab of the ALPR platform and export directly as CSV files. I am requesting those exports, not a summary, and not the public Transparency Portal report."

Verification note. Retention periods, statutory citations, platform feature names, and state law change frequently. Verify the current statute number for your state and the current record names before filing. This guide is a starting point, not legal advice; nothing in it creates an attorney-client relationship.

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