

Laserfiche ECM Blogs

Case Closed

Written by Melissa Henley

The majority of legal cases in California begin in one of the state's 58 superior courts. With facilities in more than 450 locations, the superior courts hear both civil and criminal cases, as well as family, probate and juvenile cases. The superior courts make up the largest part of California's judicial system—which is itself the largest in the United States.



Imaging Supervisor Marc St. Laurent.

The Kern County Superior Court has a metropolitan division in Bakersfield, CA, and three regional divisions with seven branches. Staff had been microfilming case files for many years, but, according to Imaging Supervisor Marc St. Laurent, this solution was far from ideal. "Microfilm was never a good storage medium," he explains. "Court cases can be active for many years, so we frequently need to add probation reports or other information to the case file. We had to re-film entire files when we added a single piece of paper, and it was very difficult to find information."

Staff knew they had to replace this antiquated archiving system, so they began searching for a flexible, cost-effective solution that would meet everyone's needs. "We knew we needed to make files more accessible for judges, but the technology had to be extremely user-friendly," St. Laurent says. "Our court clerk also needed to respond to records requests more quickly. In fact, we wanted to make case files immediately available, rather than making customers wait 2-3 days."

The court chose to implement a Laserfiche® digital document management solution because it met all these needs. "Our previous clerk was very technology-minded, and he really grabbed the bull by the horns," St. Laurent remembers. "We didn't have any

technology in the regional courts—in fact, most of our branches were storing files in trailers in the parking lot. So we knew the regional courts were a great place to start rolling out our solution.”

The deployment began with a pilot project in the Lamont regional court, chosen for its smaller size and lower case volume. The court freed up space, improved file accessibility and provided better service, proving that Laserfiche could meet the needs of Kern County’s other courts. Best of all, judges were comfortable with the solution—once they realized that files, in St. Laurent’s words, “were not going to disappear into the ether.”



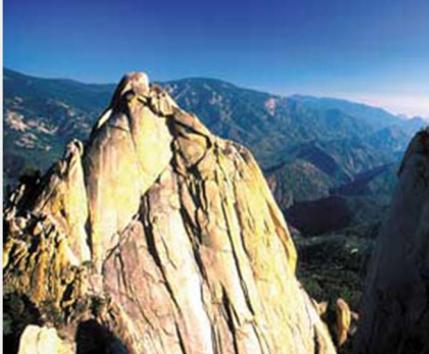
Fly fishing in the Kern River.

After the successful deployment in Lamont, the court expanded its Laserfiche system county-wide. The enterprise deployment began with court staff scanning closed files. “We began scanning adjudicated case files so they are securely archived,” St. Laurent says. “We’ve gone back six years on felonies and three and a half years on misdemeanors. We’d eventually like to start scanning at the counter, but right now we have such a large backlog of files, we’re just trying to deal with that.”

Staff at each court use Laserfiche to scan case files into the central repository in Bakersfield. The court uses Laserfiche’s flexible file structure to organize its repository by division, and then by year, date and case number. To automate this process, the county’s reseller, DataNet Solutions, designed a custom integration that not only creates the file structure, but also integrates with the state judicial database, the California Justice Information System (CJIS). “This customization is just wonderful,” St. Laurent says. “All our staff have to do is enter the case number, and Laserfiche automatically pulls the name, date of birth and other pertinent information directly from CJIS. Not only does this ensure quality control, it also limits manual data entry, which speeds up filing.” Eventually, the court plans to expand the integration to include CLASS ACT, the state’s civil, family law and probate database.

After files are scanned into the repository, over 300 users county-wide access them using nothing more than their Web browsers—thanks to Laserfiche WebLink™.

“WebLink is great, because there’s no software installation required,” St. Laurent says. “Our IT staff find Laserfiche extremely easy to support. We have two staff members managing Laserfiche from the network end, and, because of WebLink, they’re able to handle everything countywide from our Bakersfield location. It’s really a smooth process.”



A view from “The Needles” in the Sequoia National Forest.

And it isn’t just IT staff who appreciate Laserfiche. Court staff find it useful, too—just not in the ways you might expect.

While staff definitely benefit from improved access to information, it’s the security features, like blackout and whiteout redactions, that they really appreciate. “It seems like such a small thing, but to them, it’s extremely important because it’s so useful. They don’t have to take markers to black out witnesses’ names or addresses on arrest reports anymore—there’s been a lot of excitement over that feature,” St. Laurent explains.

Since deploying Laserfiche county-wide four years ago, court staff have eliminated approximately 40,000 files from their records room. Now, instead of calling the records center and waiting for records to be delivered, clerks simply open Laserfiche and retrieve the files they need. When another branch requests felony case files from the Bakersfield office, staff scan the files into Laserfiche, rather than mailing a physical copy. With Laserfiche, authorized staff in any location can instantly retrieve these files—eliminating lost files and saving both time and money.

“Customers probably don’t notice much from the front end, because Laserfiche helps us deal with cases that are already disposed of,” St. Laurent says. “But it has certainly made us more efficient behind the scenes.”

But some customers have noticed the difference. Before Laserfiche, customers seeking files from the regional courts would have to travel to the metro division in Bakersfield. “From the court in Ridgecrest to metro division in Bakersfield is a two and a half hour drive, one-way,” St. Laurent says. “But with Laserfiche, we can help people right at the counter, even if they’re at the wrong building.”

St. Laurent remembers when Laserfiche helped court staff cope with a quintuple murder trial, one of the biggest trials in the county’s history. “About 500 potential jurors were brought in for questioning, and the media wanted access to their questionnaires,” he remembers. “The judge had the idea that, instead of copying hundreds of eight-page jury questionnaires for reporters, we’d scan them into Laserfiche. We created a public folder reporters could access from the media center, which saved our staff a lot of time.



The Kern River valley is a haven for rock climbers.

“The system worked beautifully, and it really exposed the court at large to Laserfiche’s benefits,” he continues. “Because this is a death penalty case, it will automatically be appealed. We’re hoping that the appellate court will let us submit the jury questionnaires on disc.”

Eventually, court staff hope that more county departments will use Laserfiche to enable more efficient information sharing. The sheriff’s department and other law enforcement agencies already have access to restraining orders stored in Laserfiche. Court staff scan the orders into the Laserfiche repository, providing law enforcement officers and 911 dispatchers with immediate access—something that St. Laurent says has definitely increased public safety.

The public defender’s office is also using Laserfiche, and St. Laurent hopes the probation department will be next in line. “This would be very effective. There’s a lot of document flow between our two organizations, and it would be great to have probation reports immediately available to judges at sentencing hearings,” he says.

For the Kern County Superior Court, Laserfiche has proved to be a wise investment, one which St. Laurent would recommend to other courts. “Laserfiche is here to stay as far as our court operations are concerned. You don’t lose files once they’re captured, it’s simple to add information to case files, even years after the fact, and it’s good for customers. It’s a fantastic solution.”



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