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A Proposed Budget Cut Has EPA Libraries Closing or Cutting Back – Before the Bill Has Passed

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The proposed appropriations bill for the Department of the Interior is a lengthy document, and wouldn't appear to be very interesting reading. But if you rely on the agency whose budget is being enhanced or reduced, the story changes. For the patrons of the EPA libraries – attorneys, librarians, the working press, scientists, enforcers, EPA researchers, or concerned citizens – the bill makes riveting reading: It proposes to cut the EPA library system's \$2.5 million dollar budget by \$2 million dollars. The House has approved the bill (H.R. 5386), but the Senate has not acted yet. The public outcry has been significant.

In a June 29, 2006 letter, the presidents of 17 locals of the American Federation of Federal Employees, representing 10,000 EPA scientists, engineers, and technical experts – more than half the agency's workforce – asked Congress to prevent the budget cuts. The EPA staff is concerned that library closure would affect the ability of the EPA to respond to homeland-security and public-health issues, perform its enforcement duties, and provide public access to the agency's past reports and technical documents. The EPA libraries catalog 50,000 unique documents every year. Internally, EPA library materials are used for documenting regulatory enforcement, locating the most current information on new environmental technologies, and preparing scientific justification for EPA's proposed regulations.

According to the letter's signatories, the EPA proposed the budget cuts, which were approved by the Office of Management and Budget prior to submission to Congress. The theory behind the proposed cuts was that the EPA would provide services via the Internet, digitize materials, and save money on the reduction in physical libraries. The scientists and engineers who use EPA libraries are extremely skeptical and believe the savings are illusory: The remaining budget is insufficient to digitize the 67,000 documents that need to be converted to an electronic format to implement the EPA's plan. Further, there is no estimate of how long it will be before those documents are available digitally, library collections are being dispersed without coherent retention and retrieval plans, and the digitization plan does not cover the multitude of services provided by EPA libraries, which saved \$7.5 million in EPA staff time in 2004. The plan may result in the eventual loss of **all** EPA library services to the public. The House Science Committee has asked the General Accounting Office to investigate the EPA's plans to close and limit the libraries.

Although no budget cut has been approved by Congress, here's what has already happened:

- The EPA Headquarters library closed to the public on October 1, 2006. As has been the case with other EPA library closures, the library's collection of books, reports, and research papers has been boxed up and is not accessible to anyone.
- The Region 5 (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin) library permanently closed in August 2006.

- The New York branch library (Region 2) closed its doors to the public and limited staff access to the collection in May 2006. A lot of material from Region 5 was sent here, and will now be harder to access.
- The Ft. Meade, Maryland (Region 3) library closed in February 2006 and, according to PEER Executive Maryland Director Jeff Ruch, "important research on the Chesapeake Bay is locked away in boxes since EPA closed its Ft. Meade library ... yet EPA still maintains that restoring the Chesapeake is a top priority."
- Region 1 (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont & Tribal Nations) is being downsized.
- In San Francisco, the Region 9 library (Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, the Pacific Islands subject to US law, and approximately 140 Tribal Nations) has cut back 20%, and is only open 4 days a week. The San Francisco library receives an enormous number of inquiries, including nearly 30,000 public inquiries in 2005.
- The Region 6 library (serving Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and 65 Tribal Nations) and the Region 7 library (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and 9 Tribal Nations) are closed.
- On October 9, 2006, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility announced that the EPA is seriously reducing EPA employee access to technical journals, environmental publications, and environmental news reports. Region 3 has been instructed to cut its journal subscriptions in half, and other offices will face comparable cutbacks. Together with the library cutbacks, this may mean no access to either a hard copy or an online version of the cutting-edge information EPA scientists and technical experts need to keep abreast of new information affecting EPA cases and regulations. The directive implements, in advance, a separate EPA budget cut – a suggested 50% decrease in serials funding for the EPA.

It is not just EPA scientists, technicians, and attorneys who will have trouble accessing vital information. Since the EPA was founded in 1970, the public has also been a major beneficiary of the EPA's research and collection. If the EPA libraries remain closed or offer only limited access, are underfunded, and lack the latest scientific resources, concerned private citizens and environmental groups will be unable to monitor their communities and help prevent and remediate degradation of the environment. The documents in EPA libraries relate to issues that vitally affect the health and well-being of everyone, and need to be freely accessible. Testimony collected by the American Association of Law Libraries, urging a vote against the EPA budget cuts, quotes the experience of an information specialist:

[T]he information services provided by the EPA library system are among the best of any government agency I have used. It is a tremendous resource for environmental science, toxicology, risk assessment and pollution topics which are vital for our nation to combat the complex environmental problems we face today. As an environmental librarian whose firm works closely with the EPA and with companies who must comply with environmental regulations, not having access to these vital materials would be so detrimental to our ability to practice sound science and prudent decision making.

Local librarians remember the scramble to find documents in other libraries during the closure of Region 9's library in San Francisco after the 1989 earthquake. The massive cutbacks and closures proposed in H.R. 5386 will result in a much more permanent loss of access. It's not too late to go back to full funding for EPA libraries. Speak to your senators soon.

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