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Editorial: Protecting Public Access to Environmental Information and Saving the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Libraries

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Among the treasures of the environmental information domain are the crown “jewels” of the EPA National Library Network. This national collection of regional, research, and operational libraries in the Environmental Protection Agency was created in 1971 and set into being in 1972. Since then the EPA Library Network has grown and evolved and serves as the information hub of the agency whose mission is “to protect human health and the environment”. This unique library network maintains special collections of reports, journals, monographs, government documents, and other resources. Professional staff provide a myriad of reference and referral services, database instruction, data and information searching, and outreach services for EPA employees engaged in research, policy, enforcement, and outreach programs. These same services are also provided for the public at-large. The thread running among these entities is their common need for access to critical environmental data and information that is provided efficiently, effectively, economically, and equitably.

For more than 10 years, access to the collections and services of the EPA libraries has been evolving. Migration of print materials into digital, full-text formats, development of issues, subject-specific online compilations, creation of user-friendly databases and information gateways have been at the forefront of operations within the EPA Library.¹ Carrying out these data and information functions has been so critical to the EPA that a reorganization of the agency was needed to “improve the way we collect, manage, integrate, and provide access to environmental information,” stated the EPA Administrator Carol Browner in an October 26, 1999 press advisory announcing the creation of the EPA Office of Environmental Information.

During the autumn of 2005 ominous signs appeared on the horizon for the EPA National Library Network. A once relatively obscure, 10-page report provided an internal library staff overview of the impacts of a proposed \$500,000 cut in the EPA Headquarters library budget, and an additional \$1.5 million “cost savings” recommended by the Office of Environmental Information that would affect operations in the EPA Regional and research libraries.² These cuts represent an 80% overall cut in the EPA Libraries’ FY ’07 budget and would realize the elimination of about one-third of the library network's staff. This situation raised great doubts that the EPA Libraries will be able to function under such proposed budget cuts.³

The library world was stunned when the story of the proposed cuts to the EPA Libraries' budget was released on February 10, 2006 by the watch-dog group, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).⁴ Within one week both the Special Libraries Association⁵ and the American Library Association⁶ issued official statements decrying the proposed cuts to the EPA Library Network. On February 24, the American Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, the American Association of Law Libraries, and the Association of Research Libraries issued a joint letter to the Honorable Charles H. Taylor, Chair of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies of the House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations. This letter stated their collective opposition "to the proposed \$2.5 [sic] Million cut in the FY2007 budget of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that will likely result in the closure of the Headquarters Library and many of its 27 regional and research libraries."⁷

The consulting report prepared for the EPA Library Network in 2004 indicates how effective and economically efficient are the services provided by this library network. Using detailed statistics on the use of various library services a variety of metrics provided a general finding that the library saves the agency and the public tidy sums of money and time. This report indicated that it costs the EPA roughly \$6.2 million per year to maintain it with full operational support. However, it also stated that the EPA libraries save the agency and the public up to more than \$21.1 million per year, and places a benefit to cost ratio between 2.2:1 and 5.7:1.⁸ Since the inception of the United Nations Environment Programme's INFOTERRA in 1977, The EPA served as the USA National Focal Point (NFP) and Regional Service Center (RSC) to North America, the Caribbean, and Mexico (via a joint UNEP and State Department agreement). This special collection was maintained and managed by the US EPA at the EPA Headquarters Library in Washington, DC.⁹ On May 16, 2003, virtually unknown to the library communities and associations (there is absolutely no information in the entire ALA website about INFOTERRA or the USA National Focal Point before or after its untimely demise), EPA closed its INFOTERRA services. Since then, there has been no support within the EPA for email, fax, phone and letter inquiries. The INFOTERRA collection was incorporated into the Headquarters Library.

The loss of the information arm of the EPA Libraries will impact not only issues like climate change but also the presence and impacts of chemical in our environment, and other threats to health of our oceans, lands, lake, and rivers. For now the best thing readers can do is to follow American Library Association's suggestions¹⁰ and contact members of the House of Representatives to address this issue. Go to the website of the House of Representatives at www.house.gov to locate your representative and voice your concerns over the possible loss of this vital resource. As you read this,

libraries are closing or reducing access to their collections, institutional memory is walking out of doors voluntarily and a decades-long reputation of excellence is facing extinction.

Endnotes

¹ Over the years EPA librarians have contributed openly about the ongoing changes taking place within the EPA National Library Network. Many of these discussions and presentations have taken place within the structures of the annual meetings of the Task Force on the Environment as part of the American Library Association and the Special Libraries Association. Other presentations by EPA library managers have also reflected the ongoing nature of the evolution of library services and functions within the EPA, such as: Huffine, Richard L. (2003, October 23). EPA Update: Current activities of EPA librarians, CGMI Europe Presentation: http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/pubs/proceedings/3pro_huffine.ppt

Recently the EPA Libraries have been featured in several professional publications, such as the following: Affelt, A. (2005). Envisioning the environment: The U.S. EPA web site. *Online* 29(4), 22-5.

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² EPA Library Network Workgroup.(2005, November 22). *EPA Library Network: Challenges for FY 2007 and beyond*. http://www.peer.org/docs/epa/06_9_2_library_network.pdf

³ Lipman, Larry. (2006, March 12). EPA Libraries facing massive funding cut. Cox News Service. http://www.wacotrib.com/nation/content/shared/news/nation/stories/2006/SUNSHINE_EPA_ADV12_CO_W6130.html

⁴ Offut, Chas. (2006, February 17). Bush axing libraries while pushing for more research: EPA set to close library network and electronic catalog. News release: Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

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⁵ Special Libraries Association. (2006, February 17). News release: SLA Denounces Proposal to Close EPA Libraries. <http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/pressroom/pressrelease/2006prelease/pr2605.cfm>.

⁶ American Library Association. (2006, February 17). News release: EPA Library funds cut 80% under Bush budget. <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=alonline&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=116849>

⁷ Joint Letter issued February 24, 2006: www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=governmentinfo&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=118373

⁸ Stratus Consulting. (2004). Business case for information services: EPA's regional libraries and centers. EPA 260-R-04-001, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. 21 p. <http://www.epa.gov/natlibra/epa260r04001.pdf>

⁹ McNamara, E. J. (1993). INFOTERRA: Gateway to international environmental information. *Green Library Journal*, 2(1), 12-16.

¹⁰ American Library Association Washington Office. (2006, March 9). Proposed Cuts to EPA Libraries. *Newsline* 15(35). <http://www.ala.org/ala/washoff/washnews/2006ndx/035mar09.htm>

Additional Reading on this Issue

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