

# Why Are EPA Libraries Closing?

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In February 2006, when President Bush unveiled his budget proposal for FY 2007, the EPA Library Network learned that its annual disbursement would be slashed 80 percent from 2006 funding levels—from \$2.5 million to just \$500,000. A month later, administrators at the EPA’s Region 5 facility in Chicago circulated an e-mail announcing it would be the first to close. By October, two other regional libraries were gone. Together, the three facilities had served the entire middle United States.

Since last year, the EPA has drifted from its initial assertion that the move is purely budgetary to embrace the closings as a technological achievement. “EPA’s library modernization is providing better access to a broader audience,” says EPA spokesperson Jessica Emond. “When libraries go digital, everyone benefits.”

Not everyone sees it that way. Opponents of the plan have presented a laundry list of concerns ranging from questions about the EPA’s motive to critiques of its method. Foremost among the critics are employees of the agency itself. Shortly after the initiative was proposed, the presidents of 17 union locals—representing over 10,000 EPA scientists, researchers and support personnel—lodged a formal protest against the closings.

In a letter to Sens. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) and Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), members of the American Federation of Government Employees, the National Treasury Employees Union, the National Association of Government Employees, and the Engineers and Scientists of California urged Congress to reverse the budget cuts and mandate that the EPA keep its libraries open. They have been joined by a growing coalition of lawmakers, advocacy groups and citizens.

“The EPA libraries are essential to the agency’s ability to carry out its mission to protect human health and the environment,” says Michael Halpern, outreach coordinator for the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), one of several groups actively engaged in the debate.

Founded in 1971, the EPA Library Network consisted of 27 facilities across the country at its height, serving 10 regional agency offices, two research centers and 12 EPA laboratories, as well as thousands of ordinary citizens. The libraries house information on everything from basic sciences, such as biology and chemistry, to local records on hazardous waste, drinking water, pollution prevention and toxic substances.

According to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), in 2005 the library network handled more than 134,000 research requests from its own scientific and enforcement staff and housed an estimated 50,000 “unique” documents that are available nowhere else. “Access to information is one of the best tools we have for protecting the environment,” says Jeff Ruch, PEER’s executive director. “The dismantlement of EPA’s Library Network has been directed from above without any assessment of the information needs of the agency.”

Emond says that the EPA has implemented a stringent agenda to ensure that no essential material gets lost and has followed the American Library Association's (ALA) guidance by developing criteria for reviewing its library collection.

ALA President Leslie Burger takes issue with that assertion. "The [ALA's] loose collection of resources is a good starting point for thinking about collection development policies but does not constitute ALA guidance and criteria," said Burger, in a recent statement to the National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology.

UCS's Halpern also takes issue with the linking of digitization and closings. "The EPA's plan is backwards," says Halpern. "A thoughtful and deliberate digitization of all of the information in a library's collection should occur before the library's physical location is closed."

Still others question the value of digitization itself, arguing that access is only part of the equation.

"A simple search engine just isn't enough," said Burger. "With the loss of the brick-and-mortar facilities comes the loss of the most important asset in the library: the librarian. After all, what good is information if you can't find it?"

Further, the EPA itself has admitted that it may not have the authority to digitize certain copyrighted material. Add to that the fact that many EPA compendiums are hundreds of pages in length and contain complex maps and graphics—which require special viewing formats—and it's easy to see why digitization of the entire catalogue is virtually impossible.

A newly invigorated Democratic Congressional majority has taken up the cause. In a November 30 letter to EPA administrator Stephen Johnson, Reps. John Dingell (D-Mich.), Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.), Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and James L. Oberstar (D-Minn.) urged the agency to stop closing libraries until Congress has had the chance to review the plan. The lawmakers had previously asked the Government Accountability Office to look into the closings.

"Congress ... has approved neither the President's 2007 budget request nor the library closure," they wrote. "We request that you maintain the status quo of the libraries and their material while this issue is under investigation." As *In These Times* went to press, the outcry seemed to be having some effect.

On January 12, a Washington D.C.-based blog run by Cox Newspapers reported that the EPA had halted the closings. But Emond says this was a mischaracterization since the agency never planned to close any more libraries.

Nevertheless, she says, "We have rescheduled our recycling schedule in order to take time to address some of the Congressional questions."

So far, the EPA says it has digitized about half of its collection, but admits it will take at least another two years to finish the project.

Halpern worries the damage may already be done. "Even if Congress acts now, it's pretty difficult to put a library back together once the bookshelves and the microfilm readers have been sold and scientific journals have been recycled," he says.

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