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Restructuring EPA's Libraries: Background and Issues for Congress

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August 22, 2007

Abstract. Near the end of the 109th Congress, some Members raised questions about the closing of several libraries of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), expressing concerns about the continued availability of their collections. Library professional associations and public interest groups raised similar questions about access to this information. EPA reported that the closings were part of its efforts to restructure its libraries in response to the agency's transition from walk-in services to electronic dissemination of information, as a result of the increasing use of the Internet to access its collections. In response to concerns about this transition, EPA is refining its plan to restructure its library network, and reports that it will not make any further changes to its library services until the plan is completed and reviewed by affected stakeholders. As EPA refines its plan, interest in the library closings has continued in the 110th Congress. In its report on the FY2008 Interior appropriations bill (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110- 91), the Senate Appropriations Committee recommended a \$2.0 million increase above the President's FY2008 budget request for EPA to restore the libraries that have been closed or consolidated. Some Members also have questioned the library closings in hearings and in written communications with EPA.

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Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

Near the end of the 109th Congress, some Members raised questions about the closing of several libraries of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), expressing concerns about the continued availability of their collections. Library professional associations and public interest groups raised similar questions about access to this information. EPA reported that the closings were part of its efforts to restructure its libraries in response to the agency's transition from walk-in services to electronic dissemination of information, as a result of the increasing use of the Internet to access its collections. In response to concerns about this transition, EPA is refining its plan to restructure its library network, and reports that it will not make any further changes to its library services until the plan is completed and reviewed by affected stakeholders. As EPA refines its plan, interest in the library closings has continued in the 110th Congress. In its report on the FY2008 Interior appropriations bill (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110-91), the Senate Appropriations Committee recommended a \$2.0 million increase above the President's FY2008 budget request for EPA to restore the libraries that have been closed or consolidated. Some Members also have questioned the library closings in hearings and in written communications with EPA.

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Introduction

EPA established a library network in 1971, a year after the agency's creation. These libraries house a wide range of scientific, technical, and legal information. EPA staff use this information in multiple ways to carry out the agency's mission, such as the setting and enforcement of pollution control standards. EPA's libraries also serve the public. Over time, EPA had expanded its network into 26 libraries, operated by different agency offices depending on the specialized nature of the collections. EPA began restructuring its libraries in FY2007 in an effort to transition from walk-in services to electronic dissemination of its collections. As part of this restructuring, EPA closed five of its libraries at the beginning of FY2007, including its Headquarters library in Washington, DC. EPA also has altered access at some of its libraries that have remained open. **Table 1** indicates the operating status of each library in EPA's network as of August 2007.

EPA reports that walk-in services remain available to the public at most of the libraries that remain open, but that an appointment is required or preferred at some libraries. Certain libraries also have restricted access to EPA staff, and only offer reference services to the public via telephone, fax, or e-mail. EPA is refining its plan to restructure its library network, and reports that it will not make any further changes to its library services until the plan is completed and reviewed by affected stakeholders. The following sections of this report summarize EPA's efforts to restructure its libraries, examine relevant issues, and discuss congressional action in appropriations bills, hearings, and written communications from individual Members to the agency.

Table 1. EPA Library Operating Status as of August 2007

| Library | Location | Operating Status |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Repository Libraries | | |
| Headquarters | Washington, DC | Repository Only—Library Closed (10/06) |
| Environmental Research Center | Research Triangle Park, NC | Open to the Public |
| Environmental Research Center | Cincinnati, OH | Open to EPA Staff Only |
| Regional Office Libraries | | |
| Region 1 | Boston, MA | Open to the Public—Appointment Required |
| Region 2 | New York, NY | Open to the Public—Appointment Required |
| Region 2 | Edison, NJ | Closed (9/04) |
| Region 3 | Philadelphia, PA | Open to the Public |
| Region 4 | Atlanta, GA | Open to the Public |
| Region 5 | Chicago, IL | Closed (10/06) |
| Region 6 | Dallas, TX | Closed (10/06) |
| Region 7 | Kansas City, KS | Closed (10/06) |
| Region 8 | Denver, CO | Open to the Public |
| Region 9 | San Francisco, CA | Open to the Public |

| Library | Location | Operating Status |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| Region 10 | Seattle, WA | Open to the Public |
| Specialized Libraries | | |
| Legislative Reference Library | Washington, DC | Open to EPA Staff Only |
| Office of General Counsel Law Library | Washington, DC | Open to the Public—Appointment Preferred |
| Chemical Library | Washington, DC | Closed (10/06) |
| Environmental Forensics Library | Denver, CO | Open to the Public—Appointment Required |
| Research Laboratory Libraries | | |
| Atmospheric Sciences Modeling Division Library | Research Triangle Park, NC | Open to the Public |
| Environmental Sciences Division Technical Research Center | Las Vegas, NV | Open to the Public—Appointment Required |
| Ecosystem Research Division Library | Athens, GA | Open to the Public |
| Atlantic Ecology Division Library | Narragansett, RI | Open to the Public |
| Gulf Ecology Division Library | Gulf Breeze, FL | Open to the Public—Appointment Required |
| Mid-continent Ecology Division Library | Duluth, MN | Open to the Public |
| Western Ecology Division Library | Corvallis, OR | Open to the Public |
| Groundwater and Ecosystems Restoration Division Library | Ada, OK | Open to the Public |
| National Vehicle and Fuel Emissions Laboratory Library | Ann Arbor, MI | Open to the Public |

Source: Prepared by the Congressional Research Service with information from EPA's National Library Network web page at <http://www.epa.gov/natlibra/libraries.htm>.

EPA's Efforts to Restructure Its Libraries

Although EPA did not initiate the restructuring of its library network until FY2007, the agency has been assessing its library services for the past few years, as reliance on the electronic dissemination of its collections has become more widespread. In January 2004, EPA's Office of Environmental Information (OEI) completed a cost-benefit analysis of its library services to inform decisions about how best to disseminate its collections.¹ This study concluded that EPA's libraries provide "substantial value" to the agency and the public, with a benefit-to-cost ratio ranging between 2:1 and 5.7:1. These benefits are based on time saved in finding information with the assistance of a librarian. The calculated benefit-to-cost ratio varied depending on the dollar value ascribed to time savings and the type of service provided. The OEI study also noted other unquantifiable benefits, such as the higher quality of information typically found with the assistance of a librarian. While the study noted the benefits of EPA's library services, it also

¹ EPA. Office of Environmental Information. *Business Case for Information Services: EPA's Regional Libraries and Centers*. EPA 260-R-04-001. January 2004. 21 pp. Available on EPA's website at <http://www.epa.gov/natlibra/epa260r04001.pdf>.

acknowledged the need for altering how these services are provided to respond to technological changes in how users obtain information, as well as future budget uncertainties affecting the agency's ability to continue services in their present form.

In August 2006, EPA released an initial plan to restructure its libraries, with implementation starting in FY2007.² EPA determined that the utility of some of its libraries had declined as the agency made more information available through the Internet and as heightened security at its facilities led to fewer public visitors. Because of these factors, the plan recommended the closing of EPA's library at its Headquarters Office in Washington, DC, and its libraries in Regions 5, 6, and 7. EPA closed these four libraries at the beginning of FY2007. As indicated in **Table 1**, EPA also has closed its Chemical Library and has altered access at several other libraries that remain open. These latter changes were not identified specifically in EPA's original FY2007 restructuring plan.

Although walk-in services are no longer available at the libraries that have closed, EPA reports that the public will have access to these collections through the Internet and will continue to be able to request items by telephone, fax, and e-mail. EPA also reports that its staff will continue to have access to its collections via the agency's intranet and internal agency exchanges. Although many items in EPA's collections are available through the Internet, not all items are in electronic format. EPA is in the process of digitizing its collections and selecting paper collections for archiving in agency repositories and possibly other libraries, including the Library of Congress. EPA's initial restructuring plan also indicated that some dated materials may be discarded. The plan provided guidelines for EPA staff to determine how the collections are to be managed, but did not identify which specific materials would be retained, disbursed, or discarded, nor the time frame within which that process would be completed.

Members and committees of Congress, library professional associations, public interest groups, and individuals expressed numerous concerns about the restructuring of EPA's library network, as the agency proceeded with the implementation of its plan and closed the above-mentioned libraries in October 2006. Prior to the closings, employee unions representing EPA staff also had written to the House and Senate appropriations committees in June 2006, expressing their concerns about the availability of information needed to carry out the agency's mission.³ In response to this array of concerns, the EPA Administrator announced a temporary moratorium in January 2007, prohibiting the agency from making further changes to its library services for 90 days.⁴

EPA has extended the moratorium, and indicates that it is reviewing its methods of delivering library services to make its collections available to EPA staff and the public. EPA reports that no further changes will be made to its library services until the agency has refined its restructuring plan, and the final plan has been reviewed and communicated among affected stakeholders. The agency has issued a draft outline for the next version of its restructuring plan, the *EPA Library*

² EPA. Office of Environmental Information. *EPA FY 2007 Library Plan: National Framework for the Headquarters and Regional Libraries*. August 15, 2006. 18 pp. Available on EPA's website at http://www.epa.gov/natlibra/Library_Plan_National_Framework081506final.pdf.

³ The letter is available on the website of Chapter 280 of the National Treasury Employees Union, representing EPA headquarters staff, at <http://nteu280.org/Issues/EPA.Library.End.pdf>.

⁴ Letter from Stephen L. Johnson, EPA Administrator, to the Chairmen of the House Committees on Energy and Commerce, Oversight and Government Reform, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Science and Technology, January 12, 2007.

*Strategic Plan for 2008 and Beyond.*⁵ The draft identifies the agency's objectives and the procedures that it intends to develop to continue its transition to the electronic dissemination of its collections, while continuing to provide "an appropriate level" of access to physical libraries and professional library staff. What the agency would consider appropriate access is unclear.

Key Issues

Questions about the implementation of EPA's initial plan to restructure its libraries have been rooted in concerns about continued access to critical information needed to understand the effects of pollutants and contaminants on human health and the environment. Although EPA states that the restructuring of its libraries is a necessary element in its continued transition to the electronic dissemination of information, opponents have raised numerous issues in regard to how this transition would occur and how certain collections would be affected. Among the primary concerns are which materials would be selected for retention, dispersal to other libraries, or disposal.

Whereas EPA's initial restructuring plan provided guidelines for these decisions, it did not include mechanisms to oversee how they are applied, or a means through which the public could comment on collections decisions. Questions were raised as to whether some materials that may be deemed of value to certain users could be permanently discarded. Of the collections that are retained, it is uncertain which materials would be converted to electronic format and made available through the Internet, or physically archived. EPA also has noted that it will not be able to digitize copyrighted materials in its collections, raising questions about continued access to these materials. Increased use of the Internet for access to EPA's collections also raises questions as to whether agency staff and the public may need to rely more heavily on themselves to find information. EPA more recently has confirmed on its website, cited in **Table 1**, that its remaining libraries will continue to offer reference services to the public via telephone, fax, or e-mail.

There also have been questions about access to EPA's collections while physical documents are being converted into electronic format. EPA reports that documents selected for electronic conversion will be catalogued and tracked while awaiting conversion, and that agency staff and the public will be able to request these documents. There is some uncertainty as to whether the time required to retrieve documents from storage may delay the availability of information. Converting the agency's physical collections to electronic format also could present technical challenges in terms of the quality of digitized items, and in ensuring that the information remains in a usable electronic format over the long term as data storage technologies change over time. How these and other issues will be addressed in EPA's forthcoming library strategic plan is unclear.

Appropriations

The restructuring of EPA's library network has received attention in the FY2008 appropriations debate. On June 26, 2007, the Senate Appropriations Committee reported the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for FY2008 (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110-91), which included funding for EPA. The committee recommended an increase of \$2 million above

⁵ The draft outline of the forthcoming library strategic plan is available on EPA's website at <http://www.epa.gov/natlibra/EPAstrategicPlanOutlineALAFinal.pdf>.

the President's budget request to restore the libraries that EPA has closed or consolidated. Although the committee expressed its support for EPA's efforts to make data and information available electronically, it opposed further closures or consolidation of the remaining libraries "without evidence of how the public would be served by those changes."⁶ The committee directed EPA to submit a plan by December 31, 2007, explaining how it would use the \$2 million increase to reopen the libraries that the agency has closed, and to maintain its collections in each region. The House did not alter the President's request for EPA's library network, nor otherwise address this issue, in passing its version of the bill (H.R. 2643, H.Rept. 110-187) on June 27, 2007.

The Senate Appropriations Committee's recommendation would raise the funding level for EPA's library network to a total of \$8 million in FY2008. As indicated in **Table 2**, the President had requested \$6 million, which would continue a downward trend in funding each year since FY2005. This decline is largely because of reduced costs resulting from the closure of the agency's Headquarters library, Chemical Library, and the libraries in Regions 5, 6, and 7. The decline also is due to reduced costs from changes in services at other libraries that have remained open. Even though five of the libraries have closed, the President's FY2008 budget request did include funding to manage their collections, and to continue digitizing agency publications. Funding also would increase, or remain constant, for certain libraries in the network, despite the overall downward trend. The Senate Appropriations Committee's recommendation did not appear to alter these aspects of the President's budget request, but increased the total amount of the request to restore the libraries that were closed or consolidated in 2006.

Table 2. Appropriations for EPA Libraries: FY2005-FY2008

| FY2005 Enacted | FY2006 Enacted | FY2007 Enacted | FY2008 | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| | | | President's Request | House- Passed | Senate- Reported |
| \$8,033,000 | \$7,710,000 | \$6,540,000 | \$6,035,000 | \$6,035,000 | \$8,035,000 |

Source: Prepared by the Congressional Research Service with information from the following sources:

FY2005-FY2007 enacted amounts, and the President's FY2008 request, were provided by EPA's Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations in a written communication on May 11, 2007;

FY2008 House-passed amount is assumed to be the same as requested, as the House did not alter the request in passing the FY2008 Interior appropriations bill (H.R. 2643, H.Rept. 110-187) that would fund EPA;

FY2008 Senate-reported amount is based on an increase of \$2 million above the request recommended by the Senate Appropriations Committee in its report on the FY2008 Interior appropriations bill (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110-91.)

Other Congressional Action

In addition to appropriations bills, Congress has addressed the restructuring of EPA's libraries in hearings and in written communications with the agency. Toward the end of the 109th Congress, some Members began to express concerns about continued access to critical information in EPA's libraries, and wrote to EPA requesting a status report on the agency's efforts to digitize its

⁶ 110th Congress. Senate Appropriations Committee report to accompany S. 1696, the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2008, S.Rept. 110-91, June 26, 2007, p. 57.

collections, and urging the agency not to close its libraries or to permanently dispose of any materials. Citing similar concerns, the then Ranking Members of the House Committees on Science, Government Reform, and Energy and Commerce requested in September 2006 that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine EPA's library restructuring plan.⁷ GAO's examination is ongoing.

In the 110th Congress, the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works held an oversight hearing on February 6, 2007, to examine numerous EPA decisions, including the agency's plan to restructure its libraries. At this hearing, some Members questioned EPA's decision to close certain libraries, to reduce access at others, and to archive or dispose of certain collections. In the House, the Chairmen of four committees, including Energy and Commerce, Oversight and Government Reform, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Science and Technology, wrote to EPA on April 26, 2007, expressing concern about the agency's management of its libraries and collections.⁸ The committees requested an update on the operational status of EPA's library network, and questioned how the agency was complying with its "commitment" not to close additional libraries or dispose of materials under the Administrator's temporary moratorium. As noted earlier in this report, EPA has extended the moratorium until the agency's new strategic plan for its library network is completed and reviewed by affected stakeholders. How the new plan would address outstanding questions and concerns is unclear at this time.

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⁷ The letter is available on the House Science Committee website at http://sciencedems.house.gov/Media/File/ForReleases/gordon_epa-libraries_09sep06.pdf.

⁸ The letter is available on the House Energy and Commerce Committee website at http://energycommerce.house.gov/Press_110/110-ltr.042607.EPA.Libraries.pdf.