



CRS Report for Congress

Restructuring EPA's Libraries: Background and Issues for Congress

David M. Bearden and Robert Esworthy
Resources, Science, and Industry Division

Summary

Near the end of the 109th Congress, some Members raised questions about the closing of several libraries administered by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), expressing concerns about the continued availability of the agency's 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 the concerns about the library closings, EPA announced a temporary moratorium in January 2007, prohibiting further changes to its library services while the agency continued digitizing its collections. Interest in the library closings has continued into the 110th Congress. Although Members and Committees of Congress have addressed the closings in letters to EPA and in hearings, Congress has not addressed the matter so far in appropriations bills or other legislation. This report summarizes EPA's plan to restructure its libraries, examines relevant issues, and discusses congressional action in response to the agency's plan.

Introduction

EPA established a network of libraries 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 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 to transition from walk-in services to electronic dissemination of its collections. EPA closed five of its libraries at the beginning of FY2007, including its Headquarters library in Washington, D.C., and reduced access at four others. The closing of EPA's libraries received increasing attention toward the end of the 109th Congress, and interest has continued into the 110th Congress. In response to concerns about the continued availability of its collections, EPA announced a temporary moratorium in January 2007, ceasing further changes to its library services while the

agency continues to digitize its collections. **Table 1** indicates the operating status and location of the 26 libraries in EPA's network as of June 2007.

Table 1. EPA Library Operating Status as of June 2007

EPA Office	Library	Location	Operating Status
OEI	Headquarters	Washington, DC	Closed (10/06)
	Region 1	Boston, MA	Reduced Hours
	Region 2	New York, NY	Reduced Hours
	Region 2	Edison, NJ	Closed (9/04)
	Region 3	Philadelphia, PA	Open
	Region 4	Atlanta, GA	Open
	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
	Region 9	San Francisco, CA	Reduced Hours
	Region 10	Seattle, WA	Reduced Hours
OA	Legislative Reference Library	Washington, DC	Open
OGC	Office of General Counsel Law Library	Washington, DC	Open
OPPTS	Chemical Library	Washington, DC	Closed (10/06)
OECA	NEIC Environmental Forensics Library	Denver, CO	Open
OARM	Environmental Research Center	Research Triangle Park, NC	Open
	Environmental Research Center	Cincinnati, OH	Open
ORD	NERL — Atmospheric Sciences Modeling Division Library	Research Triangle Park, NC	Open
	NERL — Environmental Sciences Division Technical Research Center	Las Vegas, NV	Open ^a
	NERL — Ecosystem Research Division Library	Athens, GA	Open
	NHEERL — Atlantic Ecology Division Library	Narragansett, RI	Open
	NHEERL — Gulf Ecology Division Library	Gulf Breeze, FL	Open ^a
	NHEERL — Mid-continent Ecology Division Library	Duluth, MN	Open
	NHEERL — Western Ecology Division Library	Corvallis, OR	Open
	NRMRL — Groundwater and Ecosystems Restoration Division Library	Ada, OK	Open
OAR	National Vehicle and Fuel Emissions Laboratory Library	Ann Arbor, MI	Open

Source: Prepared by the Congressional Research Service with information provided in EPA's public notice of the closure of its Headquarters library in Washington, D.C. (71 *Federal Register* 54986), and with information provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations, and by individual EPA office libraries.

a. Public access by appointment only.

OA = Office of the Administrator
 OAR = Office of Air and Radiation
 OARM = Office of Administration and Resource Management
 OECA = Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance
 OEI = Office of Environmental Information
 OGC = Office of General Counsel
 OPPTS = Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances
 ORD = Office of Research and Development

NEIC = National Enforcement Investigations Center
 NERL = National Exposure Research Laboratory
 NHEERL = National Health and Environmental Effects Research Laboratory
 NRMRL = National Risk Management Research Laboratory

Appropriations

The President's FY2008 budget request included \$6.0 million for EPA's entire library network, \$500,000 less than the FY2007 funding level of \$6.5 million. CRS obtained this information directly from EPA,¹ as FY2008 budget documents issued by the Office of Management and Budget and EPA's more detailed FY2008 budget justification to Congress did not identify funding for EPA's libraries. Similarly, Congress has not identified funding for the agency's libraries in annual appropriations bills, but has allowed EPA the discretion to allocate the funding out of larger accounts that support multiple activities. The lack of a line item for EPA's libraries is not atypical, as there are many activities in agency budgets and annual appropriations bills that are not identified by line items, but are funded at an agency's discretion out of larger accounts.

As indicated in **Table 2** below, the President's FY2008 budget for EPA's library network continues a downward trend in funding since FY2005. This trend is primarily due to the closure of the agency's Headquarters library and three Regional libraries that the Office of Environmental Information (OEI) had administered, and the closure of the Chemical Library that the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances (OPPTS) had administered. This downward trend also is due to a reduction in services at other libraries that have remained open. Even though some of the libraries have closed, the President's budget does include funding to manage their collections, to convert the Headquarters library into a repository, and to digitize the agency's collections. Funding also would increase, or remain constant, for certain libraries administered by other offices, despite the decline in total funding. However, the increase for the Office of Research and Development (ORD) that began in FY2007 is mainly due to a transfer of funds from the Office of Administration and Resource Management (OARM) for the purchase of scientific journals, constituting a shift of funds rather than an increase in resources.

Table 2. Funding for EPA Libraries: FY2005 through FY2007 Enacted and the President's FY2008 Budget Request
(in thousands of dollars)

EPA Office	FY2005 Enacted	FY2006 Enacted	FY2007 Enacted	FY2008 Request
OEI	\$3,347	\$3,107	\$2,467	\$1,920
OARM	\$2,094	\$2,096	\$1,181	\$1,219
OECA	\$260	\$321	\$321	\$321
OGC	\$300	\$300	\$300	\$300
OPPTS	\$290	\$210	\$145	\$132
ORD	\$1,573	\$1,506	\$1,950	\$1,968
All EPA Offices	\$8,033	\$7,710	\$6,540	\$6,035

Source: Prepared by the Congressional Research Service with information provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations, on May 11, 2007.

¹ Information obtained from EPA's Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations in a written communication to CRS on May 11, 2007.

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.² 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 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 a plan to restructure its libraries, with implementation starting in FY2007.³ 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, D.C., and its libraries in Regions 5, 6, and 7. In conjunction with these closures, the plan reflected a \$2 million reduction proposed in EPA's FY2007 library budget for the OEI. EPA closed these four libraries at the beginning of FY2007. As indicated in **Table 1**, EPA also closed its Chemical Library and reduced operating hours at its libraries in Regions 1, 2, 9, and 10. 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 and 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 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.

² 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>].

³ 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].

Members and Committees of Congress, library professional associations, public interest groups, and individuals have expressed numerous concerns about the restructuring of EPA's library network, as the agency has proceeded with the implementation of its plan. Employee unions representing EPA staff also wrote to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, expressing their concerns about the potential impacts of the library closings on the availability of information needed to carry out the agency's mission.⁴ 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.⁵

Although the original moratorium has since expired, EPA has reported to CRS that for now it has extended the moratorium on closing additional libraries and reducing access at those that remain open.⁶ How long the moratorium will remain in effect is unclear. The agency is continuing the portion of its plan to digitize materials to prepare for broader electronic dissemination of its collections. EPA also reports that it is preparing more detailed procedures to better guide agency staff in selecting materials for conversion into electronic format, archiving, or disposal.

Implementation Issues

Questions about the implementation of EPA's plan to restructure its libraries are 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 by the agency, dispersal to other libraries, or disposal.

Whereas EPA's restructuring plan provides guidelines for these decisions, it does not include mechanisms to oversee how they are applied, or a means through which the public could comment on collections decisions. Questions have been raised as to whether some materials that may be of value to certain users could be permanently discarded and no longer available in any format. Of the collections that are retained, it is uncertain which materials will be converted to electronic format and made available through the Internet, or physically archived. EPA also has noted that it may not be able to digitize copyrighted materials, raising questions about continued access to such materials.

Increased use of the Internet for access to EPA's collections raises other questions as to whether agency staff and the public may need to rely more heavily on themselves to

⁴ 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>].

⁵ January 12, 2007, letter from Stephen L. Johnson, EPA Administrator, to the Chairmen of four House Committees: Energy and Commerce, Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Science and Technology.

⁶ Information obtained in a written communication to CRS from EPA's Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations, on May 11, 2007.

find information. Some have questioned whether EPA plans to continue to provide reference assistance through other means to compensate for the loss of walk-in services. Until now, EPA librarians have supplemented walk-in services with assistance provided through e-mail, postal mail, and telephone. The extent to which these services will continue is unclear, now that some libraries have closed.

There also are questions about the accessibility of EPA's collections while physical documents are being converted into electronic format. EPA's library restructuring plan indicates 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 the transferred information is in a usable format.

Congressional Action

As of this writing, Congress has not addressed the administration or funding of EPA's libraries in appropriations bills or other legislation. Toward the end of the 109th Congress, individual Members began to question EPA's plan to restructure its libraries, citing concerns about continued access to critical information. Some Members wrote letters to the EPA Administrator requesting additional information on the agency's efforts to digitize its collections, and urging the agency not to close its libraries or to permanently dispose of any materials. On September 19, 2006, the then Ranking Members of the House Committees on Science, Government Reform, and Energy and Commerce also sent a letter to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) requesting that GAO examine EPA's library restructuring plan.⁷ As noted above, the EPA Administrator imposed a temporary moratorium in January 2007, prohibiting further changes to its library services in response to these concerns within Congress.

Interest in the closing of EPA's libraries has continued into the 110th Congress. On February 6, 2007, the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works held an oversight hearing on numerous EPA decisions, including the agency's plan to restructure its libraries. 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 the EPA Administrator on April 26, 2007, expressing interest in the administration of the agency's libraries and its collections. The committees requested an update on the status of EPA's management of its 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.⁸

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].