



CRS Report for Congress

Restructuring EPA's Libraries: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

The closing of several libraries administered by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has raised numerous issues. The President's FY2007 budget included a \$2.5 million reduction for EPA's libraries, \$2.0 million of which was attributed mainly to these closures. EPA reports that the closings are part of its efforts to restructure its libraries to respond to the increasing use of the Internet to access its collections. Although EPA plans to digitize certain materials, some items may be archived or discarded. Members of Congress, library professional associations, and public interest groups have questioned the continued availability of EPA's collections as the agency restructures its libraries. The closing of EPA's libraries received increasing attention toward the end of the 109th Congress, including a request for the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine the agency's library restructuring plan. However, the funding and operation of the libraries were not mentioned in the FY2007 appropriations bill that would have funded EPA (H.R. 5386). This report examines EPA's plan to restructure its libraries and discusses relevant issues.

Introduction

EPA established a network of libraries in 1971 after the agency's creation in 1970. 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 to restructure its libraries in FY2007 as part of its transition from walk-in services to electronic dissemination of its collections. As a result, EPA closed five of its libraries on October 1, 2006, including its headquarters library in Washington, DC,¹ and has reduced access at four others. **Table 1** indicates the location and operating status of the 26 libraries in EPA's network, as of the beginning of FY2007, including the office within EPA that operates, or operated, each one.

¹ 71 *Federal Register* 54986.

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Table 1. EPA Library Status, as of the Beginning of FY2007

EPA Office	Library	Location	Operating Status
OEI	Headquarters Library	Washington, DC	Closed
OEI	Region 1 Library	Boston, MA	Reduced Hours
OEI	Region 2 Library	New York, NY	Reduced Hours
OEI	Region 3 Library	Philadelphia, PA	Open
OEI	Region 4 Library	Atlanta, GA	Open
OEI	Region 5 Library	Chicago, IL	Closed
OEI	Region 6 Library	Dallas, TX	Closed
OEI	Region 7 Library	Kansas City, KS	Closed
OEI	Region 8 Library	Denver, CO	Open
OEI	Region 9 Library	San Francisco, CA	Reduced Hours
OEI	Region 10 Library	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
OECA	NEIC Environmental Forensics Library	Denver, CO	Open
OARM	Environmental Research Center	Research Triangle Park, NC	Open
OARM	Environmental Research Center	Cincinnati, OH	Open
ORD	NERL — Atmospheric Sciences Modeling Division Library	Research Triangle Park, NC	Open
ORD	NERL — Environmental Sciences Division Technical Research Center	Las Vegas, NV	Open
ORD	NERL — Ecosystem Research Division Library	Athens, GA	Open
ORD	NHEERL — Atlantic Ecology Division Library	Narragansett, RI	Open
ORD	NHEERL — Gulf Ecology Division Library	Gulf Breeze, FL	Open
ORD	NHEERL — Mid-continent Ecology Division Library	Duluth, MN	Open
ORD	NHEERL — Western Ecology Division Library	Corvallis, OR	Open
ORD	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 by the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations.

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

President's FY2007 Budget

The President's FY2007 budget included a \$2.5 million reduction for EPA's entire library network, with total funding falling from \$7.0 million in FY2006 to \$4.5 million in FY2007. However, neither the FY2007 budget documents issued by the Office of Management and Budget nor EPA's more detailed FY2007 budget justification to Congress included a line item for EPA's libraries. Although some have commented on this "lack of transparency" in the President's budget, there typically are many activities in agency budgets and annual appropriations bills that are not identified by line items but are funded as part of larger programs or funding categories. CRS obtained information about the President's FY2007 budget for EPA's libraries directly from the agency.²

Table 2 indicates funding from each EPA office that was included in the President's FY2007 budget for the agency's libraries, compared with funding allocated out of enacted appropriations from FY2002 through FY2006. During this five-year period, EPA's library budget remained fairly constant at or near \$7.0 million annually (without adjusting for inflation). Of the \$2.5 million reduction proposed for FY2007, \$2.0 million is attributed primarily to savings from the closure of EPA's headquarters library and three regional libraries administered by the Office of Environmental Information (OEI). Although the President's FY2007 budget included funding for the Chemical Library administered by the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances (OPPTS), EPA has closed this library as well, as noted in **Table 1** above.

**Table 2. Funding for EPA Libraries: FY2002 through FY2006
Enacted and the President's FY2007 Budget Request**
(in millions of dollars, not adjusted for inflation)

EPA Office	FY2002 Enacted	FY2003 Enacted	FY2004 Enacted	FY2005 Enacted	FY2006 Enacted	FY2007 Request
OEI	\$2.5	\$2.5	\$2.5	\$2.5	\$2.5	\$0.5
OARM	\$1.8	\$1.8	\$2.0	\$1.9	\$2.1	\$1.1
OECA	\$0.4	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3
OGC	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3
OPPTS	\$0.6	\$0.7	\$0.6	\$0.5	\$0.2	\$0.2
ORD	\$1.4	\$1.4	\$1.5	\$1.3	\$1.6	\$2.1
All Offices	\$7.0	\$6.9	\$7.0	\$6.8	\$7.0	\$4.5

Source: Prepared by the Congressional Research Service with information provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs.

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

² Information obtained from EPA's Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations in a written communication to CRS on October 18, 2006.

The 109th Congress did not specifically address funding for EPA's libraries in the FY2007 appropriations bill that would have funded the agency. As passed by the House on May 18, 2006, and reported by the Senate Appropriations Committee on June 29, 2006, Title II of the FY2007 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill (H.R. 5386) included funding for EPA, but neither the bill nor report language altered or discussed the President's proposed decrease in EPA's budget for the agency's libraries. Consequently, both bills would have left the funding level for EPA's libraries to the agency's discretion within available funds. Later in the 109th Congress, some Members expressed their opposition to the library closures in various written communications. (See discussion under "Congressional Action" below.) The 109th Congress adjourned without completing FY2007 appropriations for EPA and most other federal agencies. Although H.J.Res. 102 (P.L. 109-383) provides funding to keep the federal government operating through February 15, 2007, it is unclear how the resolution will affect support for EPA's libraries because this activity does not have a line item to use as a baseline of funding.

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.³ 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 FY2007.⁴ The plan indicated that the agency had been working for over three years to explore how to modernize and improve its library services. EPA determined that the utility of some of its libraries had declined as the agency has made more information available through the Internet, and as heightened security at its facilities has 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. In conjunction with these closures, the plan reflected a \$2 million reduction proposed earlier in February in EPA's FY2007 library budget. As indicated in **Table 1**, EPA closed

³ 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>].

⁴ 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].

these four libraries at the beginning of the fiscal year on October 1, 2006. EPA also has closed its Chemical Library and has reduced operating hours at its libraries in Regions 1, 2, 9, and 10. These latter changes were not part of EPA's original restructuring plan. Whether EPA may close or reduce access to other libraries in the future is unclear.

Although walk-in services will no longer be 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 plans to select items for digitizing, or 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. Which materials will be retained, disbursed, or discarded, and the amount of time and funding needed to complete this process, are uncertain.

Implementation Issues

Some Members of Congress, library professional associations, public interest groups, and individuals have opposed the closing of EPA's libraries, expressing concerns about public access to critical information on the effects of pollutants and contaminants on human health and the environment. Employee unions representing EPA staff also have expressed their concerns to Congress about the potential impacts of closing the agency's libraries on the availability of information needed to carry out the agency's mission.⁵ 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 regarding how and when this transition would occur.

Among the primary concerns are which materials would be selected for retention by the agency, dispersal to other libraries, or disposal. Whereas EPA's library restructuring plan provides guidelines for these decisions, it does not include a mechanism 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.

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 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 email, postal mail, and telephone. The extent to which these services will continue is unclear, now that some libraries have closed.

⁵ 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>].

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 each document 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 at any time. However, it is uncertain whether the time required to identify and retrieve documents from storage may delay the availability of critical information. Converting the agency's physical collections to electronic format also could present technical challenges in terms of the quality of digitized items to ensure that the information is transferred entirely and in a usable format.

Congressional Action

Although the 109th Congress did not address the restructuring of EPA's libraries in FY2007 appropriations bills or other legislation, the agency's decision to proceed with closing some of its libraries received attention by individual Members. In the House, the Ranking Members of the House Committees on Science, Government Reform, and Energy and Commerce sent a letter to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on September 19, 2006, requesting that GAO examine EPA's library restructuring plan. The Members noted their "grave concerns" about the impacts of EPA's library restructuring plan on the agency's ability to carry out its mission, and questioned whether the plan would result in budget savings, considering the benefit-to-cost ratio of the libraries cited in EPA's January 2004 study. These same Members and the Ranking Member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure sent a letter to EPA on November 30, 2006, requesting that the agency continue operating its libraries and cease disposing of materials while the issue is under investigation and review by Congress.⁶

In the Senate, 18 Members submitted a letter on November 3, 2006, to the Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations and the Chair and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies. The Members asked the committees to direct EPA to restore public access to the agency's library collections at the same level that was available as of January 1, 2006. The Members also asked the committees to direct EPA to "solicit and consider" public and congressional input prior to any decisions to "close a library, cut services, or dramatically restructure" the agency's library network. On November 30, 2006, 13 Senators sent a letter to EPA expressing concerns about the disposal of its library materials, and requested that EPA not destroy or permanently dispose of information in its libraries and to compile and maintain records describing the location and content of its materials to preserve access.⁷

Considering this attention, opponents of the library closures have urged Congress to direct how the agency is to fund and administer its libraries. Because FY2007 appropriations have not been enacted, there could be subsequent opportunities in the legislative process to address this issue if the 110th Congress so chooses.

⁶ Both letters are available on the House Committee on Science Democratic Caucus website at [http://sciencedems.house.gov/Media/File/ForReleases/gordon_epa-libraries_09sep06.pdf] and [http://sciencedems.house.gov/Media/File/ForReleases/gordon_epa-libraries_30nov06.pdf].

⁷ Both letters are available on Senator Boxer's website at [<http://boxer.senate.gov/news/releases/pdf/2006/11/EPAlibrary.pdf>] and [http://boxer.senate.gov/news/releases/pdf/2006/12/EPA_Libraries.pdf].