EPA Closing Libraries, Destroying Scientific Documents
by Union of Concerned Scientists on 12.11.06

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) maintains a nationwide network of 27 libraries that provide critical scientific information on human health and environmental protection, not only to EPA scientists, but also to other researchers and the general public. But now some of those libraries are being shut down and some of the scientific information they house is being sequestered or destroyed.

The libraries represent an invaluable source of scientific knowledge on issues from hazardous waste to pollution control. To make the best scientific determinations, scientists need access to this information. In 2005, EPA’s dedicated library staff fielded more than 134,000 database and reference questions from agency scientists and the public.

In February 2006, under the guise of cutting costs, the Bush Administration proposed cutting $2 million out of the $2.5 million library services budget for fiscal year 2007. Such a drastic cut would ensure the closing of most of the library network, but would hardly register as a cost savings in the $8 billion EPA budget.

Several newspapers have covered impact of the closings, including The Christian Science Monitor, The Boston Globe, The Los Angeles Times, and the Kansas City Star. The decision of the EPA to limit access to these valuable resources is part of a greater problem of interference with the work of EPA scientists and scientists across the federal government.

Despite the fact that Congress has not yet approved these funding cuts, the EPA has already moved with lightning speed to close down several of its libraries to both the public and EPA staff. Five libraries have already been closed, and in Chicago, furniture
and library equipment originally purchased for $40,000 was sold at auction for an only $350. Some books, reports and other resources have been sent to repositories where they remain inaccessible. Other materials have already been recycled or thrown away.

Please call Administrator Johnson’s office and tell the EPA that scientists and the public need these libraries. But before you call…

The people answering the phones at EPA are claiming that UCS is distributing misinformation and that the library closures are really just part of a modernization process. We invite you to look at the evidence yourself before calling: the libraries are closing, information is being dumped, and many, many questions remain.

Other callers have also been told that it is more effective contact their members of Congress rather than the EPA. Congress is already aware of this problem and has asked the EPA to cease and desist. Now, the decision to stop closing the libraries lies with EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson.

While contacting your representatives in Congress would also help, the most effective step you can take to help preserve the EPA library system is to call Administrator Johnson’s office.

Or maybe this info is available online?

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Anonymous says:

If not have Google or Microsoft (who is trying to catch up with google books) capture and store all the info.

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Jiltedcitizen says:

I think it's a good move. The EPA is an enormous and inefficient bureaucracy and could use a lot more trimming. I believe that most if not all of the relevant information is available online today, either for free or on scientific or policy journal sites. My experience with EPA information is that it is outdated even if it is accurate. Their scope has changed so dramatically that all those 1970 reference books and studies just aren't worth the shelf space. How relevant is a 1971 Air Pollution Control Handbook, or how hard is it to find the effects of lead exposure?

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AGDubbs says:

If this is just a $2 million thing out of a $8 billion budget, I think the choice should be left to the scientists and policymakers who use that resource. They are the ones who know if it is useful to them. In this case, they don't seem please with it.

I know it's easy to say "oh, they can just google it instead", but it's not always that simple. If the libraries are useful and they can't give a good reason to shut them down, then it's suspicious.

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The vast majority of the information in these libraries is not online or accessible to the public in any other way. I live a block away from the regional EPA in Cincinnati, Ohio, which has one of these libraries under threat of closing. Through the University of Cincinnati, I know of many individuals that use this library as a resource, and the information in it is not all out of date! The closing of this library and others is seen to some I know as an effort by the current administration and EPA officials who are not fully committed to environmental protection to prevent public access to information that might be incriminating or revealing. This is a very serious issue that citizens need to be informed about, and I applaud Treehugger for running this story.

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Even old materials can be useful. Case studies never go out of date, and paper databases are sources of historical data for models into the future. Although libraries streamline all the time, the key rule is to not ever throw anything out unless it’s duplicate. Information must never be made to disappear.

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rob says: