

Cuts to EPA budget could mean library closures

The President's proposed 2007 budget for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), released in March, includes a \$2 million cut that, if implemented, will likely result in the closure of the EPA Headquarters Library as well as many of its 27 regional and laboratory libraries.

Additionally, half of the FY 2006 serials budget, \$500,000 out of \$1 million, has been cut from the serials budget of the Office of Administration and Resources Management research libraries in Cincinnati and Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. The total budget cut to the EPA libraries is \$2.5 million.

If the budget cuts are implemented, they will severely weaken or eliminate public access to the EPA's scientific and technical information resources, as well as the expertise of the information professionals who know how to identify and analyze them.

EPA libraries are essential

Since its creation in the early 1970s, EPA has been a key source of essential information for the general public, for researchers across the country, and for the agency's own scientists and staff, from whom the libraries handle more than 134,000 research requests each year. The libraries house unique collections, including an estimated 50,000 one-of-a-kind primary source documents that are available nowhere else.

In a meeting between EPA staff, ALA, the American Association of Law Libraries, and the Special Libraries Association, it was indicated that the agency is committed to digitizing all unique materials, and that they are reviewing how to phase-in that process. They do not, however, have either a business plan or a timeline for doing so. In the interim, significant resources are likely to be put in real risk of loss.

EPA's regional libraries serve the public with collections that are tailored to meet the needs of constituents by geographic region—such as mining in Colorado and wetlands in Maryland. If these regional libraries close, as they almost certainly will if the proposed budget cuts are approved, it will become extremely difficult—and in some cases impossible—for constituents and even EPA staff to find reliable information on sensitive environmental issues. The negative impact on public access to government information will be enormous.

As an example of what is at risk here, in the late 1980s or early 1990s, the EPA library in San Francisco sent many of its reports and documents to Hawaii. The University of Hawaii (UH) Library speculated that perhaps the library got them from another EPA library or office and they were duplicates; they were under the impression that a library had closed and Hawaii was getting their collection. Over a period of years, UH added the documents to its collection. They found that many of them were not in OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), nor were they listed in EPA Index, so the university did original cataloging on them and uploaded the records to OCLC. In many cases, UH was the only library listed in OCLC as owning these materials. The October 2004 flood in Hawaii destroyed about 85 percent of UH's EPA documents, including most of those that they got from the EPA library in California. Where or if this material is available anywhere else is not clear, but it would only be in EPA libraries.

Your action needed

Urge your member of Congress to restore the \$2.5 million needed for the EPA libraries to continue to operate at the same level in FY 2007 and to ensure continued public access to these essential resources. To contact Congress, visit www.onlineadvocacy.net/. Stay tuned to ALAWON for updates on this issue. ✍

Bernadette Murphy is communications specialist at ALA's Washington Office, e-mail: bmurphy@alawash.org