

GAO Report Finds EPA Library Closures Flawed

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NEWS RELEASE

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman

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GAO Report Finds EPA Library Closures Flawed

Washington, DC — A new report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) finds that the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) effort to close regional and research libraries around the country has been plagued by managerial problems. The report says that the decision to close libraries was not justified and strongly suggests that the entire process EPA has followed in closing the libraries is flawed and could deprive the public, EPA staff, state and local agencies, and academics with valuable environmental data. GAO recommends that EPA continue its moratorium on further changes to its libraries until it takes actions to justify its decisions, improve outreach, ensure sufficient oversight, and implement procedures for dispersing and disposing of materials.

The GAO report was requested by Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI), the Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, Bart Gordon (D-TN), the Chairman of the Committee on Science and Technology, and Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), the Chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and by Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), the Chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

“GAO’s report paints a grim picture of the current state of EPA’s library system. The Agency’s modernization effort is characterized by poor planning, failure to communicate with its employees, the public or Congress and failure to protect unique government assets,” said Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN). “As a result, EPA library services are impaired, employees will have a harder time doing their jobs and the public has lost access to government information. There is only one way to describe the path to this outcome -- gross mismanagement. GAO’s findings indicate EPA followed a restructuring process that focused on and achieved only one goal — closing libraries.”

“The EPA’s library system is a valuable public asset that has been built up over a period of decades, and that the EPA has been entrusted with protecting and preserving,” said Rep. John D. Dingell (D-MI), the Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. “One wonders whether this Administration’s reckless approach to closing EPA libraries stems from a failure of management or a failure to appreciate the value of scientific material collected over several decades.”

“GAO’s report makes it clear that EPA rushed to close libraries with little notice or input and disregarded concerns raised by EPA employees and in an EPA report,” said Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), Chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. “Now all who rely on EPA libraries for information are paying the price. EPA must recognize the importance of its libraries to EPA staff and the public, fully consider the input of library users, and ensure that the libraries are available to meet users’ needs.”

“Americans have a basic right to know about health and environmental hazards in their communities,” said U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. “In many cases, the EPA’s libraries are the only places where the public, EPA staff and researchers can find all the information they need to understand the risks we face from pollution. EPA never should have closed libraries in the first place, and they should fully restore them now.”

In 2006, EPA began a process that would close physical access to four of its regional libraries. In the same period, five other libraries in the network either reduced hours or services. In addition, EPA closed its Chemical Library in Washington, DC, which is used extensively in enforcement cases. Altogether, access to EPA libraries in 23 states has been completely lost, and several specialized collections have been shuttered, including EPA’s headquarters library.

The GAO report found extensive problems with how EPA implemented the library closures. For example, EPA closed the Chemical Library “without notice or explanation to EPA staff”, until after the fact.

Agency scientists and other EPA staff use EPA’s library network to provide scientific and other factual information to support the development of new rules and reports. Perhaps more importantly, EPA’s library network is vital to

the ability of EPA staff to enforce environmental regulation.

Information in the library network is also critical for local communities and state agencies, which use the libraries information to participate in EPA rulemakings to enforce environmental regulations against polluters.

The move by EPA to shutter the libraries was designed to comport with a proposed \$2 million cut in the President's Fiscal Year 2007 budget proposal, even though those cuts were merely proposed and had not been approved by Congress and were not ultimately approved by Congress. Nonetheless, EPA chose to move forward with the library closures and according to GAO, EPA attempted to save money without "determining whether potential cost savings were available" and without "performing the steps that its own study specified as necessary to ensure that the reorganization would be cost-effective."

GAO found that "EPA did not effectively justify its decision to reorganize the library network." The report also noted that EPA does not have an effective strategy to ensure the continuity of library services following the closure of these libraries and EPA does not know the full effect the closures will have on library services.

GAO found other shortcomings in EPA's process, such as:

- EPA did not conduct a cost-benefit analysis with respect to closing the libraries, failed to track costs associated with closing the libraries and did not assess the cost of losing library services;
- EPA did not conduct analyses required by the Office of Management of Budget; and did not comply with federal law concerning the disposal of federal property; and
- EPA did not have in place an agency wide communication strategy for the library closures and, as a result, did not conduct outreach activities consistently across libraries. For example, only a few of the EPA's regional libraries solicited staff views on the library closures.

EPA has argued that it would provide "broader access to a larger audience by making agency library materials available through its public website." The GAO report found that, due to copyright issues, only unique reports produced by EPA are being digitized, vastly reducing the amount of information available to EPA staff and the public through online resources. GAO's analysis found that EPA was only planning to make about 10 percent of its library holdings available online.

In January of 2007, in response to Congressional criticism, EPA instituted a moratorium on further changes to EPA's libraries. The GAO report released today recommends that EPA keep in place the ongoing moratorium on changes to the library network, until the agency can better justify its reorganization plan and improve the reorganization process.

Above: Closed sign at EPA Headquarters Library

Below: Rows of empty shelves at the Chemical library

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