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Testimony Before the U.S. Senate

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Chairman Boxer, Senator Inhofe, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me today to speak on behalf of the American Library Association (ALA). I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to comment on the closure of libraries in the EPA network during this oversight hearing.

My name is Leslie Burger, and I am director of the Princeton (N.J.) Public Library. I am also the President of the American Library Association, the oldest and largest library association in the world with some 66,000 members, primarily school, public, academic, and some special librarians, but also trustees, publishers, and friends of libraries. The Association provides leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.

I am also testifying on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL). ARL is a North American association representing 123 research libraries at comprehensive, research-extensive institutions that share similar research missions, aspirations, and achievements. AALL is a nonprofit educational organization with over 5,000 members nationwide.

I would like to talk today about two things:

- First, the vital importance of access to scientific, environmental, legal, and other government information for EPA employees and the American public;

- Second, how the recent closures of several regional libraries, the Prevention, Pesticides & Toxic Substances (OPPTS) and headquarters libraries in Washington, DC, as well as reduced access in other EPA library locations, is restricting access to important information about the environment in at least 31 states.

Given the library community's mission to promote and foster the public's access to information, it should come as no surprise that ALA – along with ARL and AALL – finds these closures troublesome.

The closing of these libraries initially took place under the guise of a proposed $2 million budget cut – suggested by the EPA and included in President Bush's budget proposal for Fiscal Year (FY) 2007. Though recently, the EPA has backed away from the financial contention, instead casting the closures as a plan to digitize library collections (or convert library collections to digital formats) to reach a "broader audience" in providing access to these materials, as EPA spokespeople mentioned in a teleconference last December, but many scientists, EPA staff, and librarians continue to dispute this contention.

Is EPA's library plan based on the end users' needs? Apparently not. Our sources tell us that there has been no outreach to the EPA Library User community – the thousands of scientists, researchers, and attorneys that use these resources on a daily basis as well as members of the public who have benefited greatly from access to these unique collections. There has been a lot of talk about getting information to a "broader audience," but how do the steps being taken by EPA speak to that effort? ALA doesn't see what's being done as connected to users' needs in any way.

Despite the fact that Congress hasn't passed a FY 2007 budget, EPA has already begun closing libraries and restricting public access to the many of the libraries that are still open. Thus far, we have seen the closure of three regional libraries – in Chicago, Dallas, and Kansas City – OPPTS and headquarters libraries in Washington, DC. Also, we have just learned that in the Region 4 library in Atlanta, the inter-library loan technician is the only staff member left, a fact EPA previously had not disclosed. The regional library in New York City was scheduled to be closed to the public with reduced hours for EPA staff on January 2, but, in light of Congressional and public pressure, EPA only recently decided to halt further closures of its libraries for the time being.

Thus, we have two primary concerns about these closures:

1. In the course of shutting down these libraries, valuable, unique environmental information will be lost or discarded, and;

2. Because there are fewer libraries and professional library staff, scientists and the public will have limited access to this information. We have a deep concern with limitations these closings would place on the public's access to EPA library holdings and the public's "right to know." In an age of global warming and heightened public awareness about the environment, it seems ironic that the Administration would choose this time to limit access to years of research about the environment.

Let me first address the loss of valuable environmental information.

Libraries and other cultural heritage institutions (archives, museums, and historical societies) have been digitizing collections for nearly 20 years. The digital resources provide access 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, regardless of where the person lives or works. Geographic and political boundaries disappear. These digital resources are subject to international and national standards, created by librarians, archivists, museum professionals, and representatives from the photographic and audio industry, public broadcasting, and computer industry.

Before we begin the costly digitization process, we always consider the needs of the current and future user communities. Digital content must be created in a fashion assuring that it will be usable 25 and 50 years from now. We need to capture cataloging information, or what we call metadata, about the digital resource so that we can find the digital object now and in the future, and so that if we have to recreate it we know how we created it the first time. Therefore, we need to know what camera we used to take the picture or which scanner we used. We also need to know copyright information and the

rights associated with the object. All that information goes into the metadata, along with the title and keywords.

In a plan that is best described as “convoluted and complicated,” materials from closed EPA libraries are being boxed and sent to other locations where they are slowly being re-cataloged and then sent back to the Headquarters Library in D.C (now closed), where there is no room to house these resources. Other resources have been sent to Research Triangle Park or the National Environmental Publications Internet Site (NEPIS) in Cincinnati where they are slowly being digitized.

Further, the library community is troubled by the "dispersing" of materials from the closed regional libraries and the OPPTS library here in Washington, D.C. What this "dispersement" entails isn't exactly clear at this point and what concerns us is how this information will be handled, and therefore what type of long-term damage has been done to the effectiveness of EPA and the ability of the American public to find important environmental and government information.

Unfortunately, there continues to be a lot that we don't know: exactly what materials are being shipped around the country, whether there are duplicate materials in other EPA libraries, whether these items have been or will be digitized, and whether a record is being kept of what is being dispersed and what is being discarded. We remain concerned that years of research and studies about the environment may be lost forever.

Will digital documents be listed in the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), a national database of the library holdings of more than 41,555 libraries in 112 countries, making them available to other research institutions? Is there metadata or cataloguing being created to ensure that digital documents can be easily located on the web? What will happen to the OCLC holdings of the closed libraries? How are "help desks" and other "library" functions being organized so that trained professionals are available to help the users of the EPA library and information services?

While we thank EPA for sending six staff members to our January conference in Seattle to address question on the status of the EPA library network, none of the concerns I have mentioned were adequately addressed.

The EPA representatives that attended the ALA conference in Seattle talked about creating a premier digital library for the 21st century and making content from the EPA libraries available to the general public as well as to EPA scientists. To do that, the EPA will need a web-enabled Digital Asset Management system, which can not only display the full range of digital resources that are being converted but also the digital resources of the future: audio, video, simulations, etc. Digital Asset Management systems, or DAMs, provide the public with tools to locate and display digital resources, but these systems can also allow the EPA to provide access to authorized users. For example, if there is a publication that contractually can only be viewed by the EPA scientists, the EPA could digitize it, put it in the database, make the metadata searchable, but only allow it to be viewed by those authorized to view it. The DAM controls all of that through its authentication system.

Preservation of the digital assets is also very important. There are already many stories of digitized collections that have been saved on CDs, and when organizations have tried to access them the content is not viewable. CDs and DVDs are fine transport media, but no longer are they considered the best practice for preservation. Networked storage, both onsite and off site, is the current best practice. Best practice also calls for keeping two to three physical copies, along with the digital copy.

This recent experience with EPA underscores the need for the Executive Branch to develop and implement effective and consistent approaches for how government agencies undertake digitization of and access to government records and publications. The process needs to be coherent and user-focused. The Government is the largest producer of information, and the information it produces is vital to public health and safety. As a consequence, it is critically important that instead of a growing patchwork of agency programs emerging – which may fail to satisfy user information needs – that we put in

place, effective and efficient public access programs to reap the benefits of the digital environment.

Without more detailed information about the EPA's digitization project, we cannot assess whether they are digitizing the most appropriate materials, whether there is appropriate metadata or cataloging to make sure that people can access the digitized materials, and that the technology that will be used to host the digital content and the finding software meets today's standards. In the age of digital media it has become easier and easier for information to simply get lost in the shuffle, and there is no way of knowing if that's the case here.

The details mean a lot. Certainly, not all parts of each EPA library collection can be digitized; they probably have some materials that are copyrighted, for example. But there is so much specialized and unique material – including reports already paid for by taxpayers – and we do not know if these are part of the digitization projects. Further, we do not know about how their maps or other specialized formats have faired, formats that are very difficult and time-consuming to digitize.

In their haste to close down libraries and meet a fiscal deadline without a clear plan, EPA has created arbitrarily established deadlines. We continue to hear allegations from former and current EPA staff, that do not wish to be identified, that hundreds of valuable journals and books may have been destroyed. These staff members are concerned that materials that are unique to EPA (and in some cases exist nowhere else in the world) are no longer available.

EPA also claims to have been following ALA guidelines in its reorganization of holdings. In fact, as far as we can tell, that meant visiting the ALA website and using our very general guidelines about "weeding" library collections. Weeding is the process of periodically removing materials from a library's collection. Materials that are "deselected" are out of date, in poor condition or if there are multiple copies available. The weeding standards were never intended for application in a digital environment.

While EPA did in fact meet with ALA staff in April and December of 2006 to discuss this issue, it failed to act upon the advice that came as a result of these meetings. As previously mentioned, to its credit, EPA also sent six staff members to ALA's Midwinter meeting in Seattle a few weeks ago to answer questions from ALA members. Even still, there remains a lack of clarity as to what EPA's plans are for its library network. But of course, we would be pleased to provide advice on the digitization plans for the EPA network of libraries.

We have a deep concern with limitations these closings would place on the public's access to EPA library holdings and the public's "right to know."

As one recently retired EPA librarian described it, the EPA libraries have been functioning like a virtual National Library on the Environment. (Indeed, the EPA was at one time a leader in providing public access to critical information in their collections.) The "virtual" national EPA library system functioned as a type of single national system. Because of its networking (both technical and human) and inter-library loan and mutual reference services, users in any EPA library had access to the collections at all other sites. This type of structure is generally very cost-effective and provides wide public access for staff and for the public.

Now that some of these regional libraries and the pesticide library are closed, key links have been removed from the chain, thus weakening the whole system, not just for those users closest to the closed facilities. Where will people look for information about their drinking water? Or which pesticides are safe for their grass? Or how much pollution is in the air of their hometown? These issues are of the utmost importance; our national health and safety depend on them!

ALA understands that we are living in the 21st century, an age when users can access much of what they need from their own desk. In the digital environment the librarian's role is changing. We also understand how complicated and costly the move to digitization

can be. But the bottom line is that libraries still need skilled professionals to a) assist users, b) organize Internet access, and c) determine the best way to make the information available to those users. When searching the EPA site, one retrieves thousands of hits for a topic such as "water." When qualifying the search by a date range the results include items outside that date range. The user will wonder about the veracity of the data and will need the assistance of the librarian

Additionally, the librarians are needed to design the interfaces; with the web you can design interfaces for the scientists, interfaces for teachers and students, and interfaces for the general public. Librarians are also needed to manage the digital objects, understand how new media must be managed; for example, when audio collections need to be converted what are the user needs, what standards are to be used, and how should they be preserved. The same goes for video and emerging formats.

Further, there are still traditional library users out there. Not everyone does their searching via web-based search engines. Many would still rather put their trust in the hands of a knowledgeable library professional, someone who knows the materials inside and out. It has been argued that the time of librarians is vanishing with the rise of the Internet, but this is a case in point where that is just not so. The EPA's environmental holdings are vast and dense, and a simple search engine just isn't enough. With the loss of the brick-and-mortar facilities comes the loss of the most important asset in the library: the librarian. After all, what good is information if you can't find it?

The future, it seems, calls for a hybrid, where not every single item or service is online, nor is everything confined to a physical structure. And the backbone of it all is a profession of skilled, knowledgeable, and, most importantly, helpful information specialists: librarians.

In closing:

ALA asks that this Committee request EPA:

a) Halt all library closures;
b) Discuss a plan with stakeholders on how best to meet user needs and plan for the future;
c) Base any actions upon these users' needs;
d) Stop dispersing and dumping of any of their library materials immediately;
e) Stabilize and inventory the collections that have been put in storage;
f) Develop and implement a government-wide process to assist agencies designing effective digitization programs; and
g) Reestablish library professionals – inherently governmental library professionals.

Further, we would ask for library specialists to assist in any investigations, such as that conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) study, or other inquiries, as to what is happening to these materials. Those EPA staff who are willing to talk (or retired and not at risk) tell us that these materials are being at best dispersed and, at worst, discarded. Also, and just as importantly, without trained librarians, users are having a very difficult time accessing what does remain of the EPA library system.

We appreciate your responsiveness and look forward to determining how we can save these collections, stabilize the library services for users and understand how best to maximize access for staff, scientists, and the public at large to important environmental information.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the American Library Association, and I am happy to take any questions from the Committee.