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Testimony Before the U.S. House

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Chairman Miller, Congressman Sensenbrenner, and Members of the Subcommittee, 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.

My name is Jim Rettig, and I am the University Librarian of the University of Richmond (VA). I am also the President-elect 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.

The importance of this hearing and the gravity of the situation has caused the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) to support my testimony and the stance of the American Library Association. AALL is a nonprofit educational organization with over 5000 members nationwide who respond to the legal information needs of legislators, judges, and other public officials at all levels of government, corporations and small businesses, law professors and students, attorneys, and members of the general public.

Given the library community’s mission, it should come as no surprise that ALA has been so outspoken in its criticism of these closures.

Overall, from the library standpoint, the key issue to determine is whether or not the EPA's library plan is based on the end users' needs. We think not. Our sources have repeatedly told us that there has been no outreach to the EPA Library user community – comprised of the thousands of scientists, researchers, and attorneys who use these resources on a daily basis, as well as members of the public who have benefited greatly from access to these unique collections. Indeed, there has been a lot of talk about getting information to a "broader audience," which EPA has repeatedly claimed is its primary

goal, but how do the steps being taken by EPA accomplish that? ALA doesn't see how what's being done is connected to users' needs.

In light of that, I would like to address two issues:

- First, the vital importance of access to scientific, environmental, legal, and other government information for EPA employees, scientists and the American public. In the course of shutting down these libraries, has valuable, unique environmental information been lost or discarded?

- Second, the necessity of the information specialist – the staff librarian – to ensure the most effective access to this information. Because there are fewer libraries and professional library staff, scientists and the public will have limited access to this information. In an age of 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.

So 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 a user lives or works. Geographic and political boundaries disappear. These digital resources meet international and national standards and are created by librarians, archivists, museum professionals, and representatives from the photographic and audio industry, public broadcasting, and computer industry.

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.) This "virtual" EPA library network functioned as a 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 structure is cost-effective and provides wide 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. All EPA library users suffer, not just those closest to the closed facilities. Where will people look for information about their drinking water? Or which pesticides are safe? Or how much pollution is in the air of their hometown? These issues are of the utmost importance; our health and safety depend on them!

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

Before libraries begin a costly digitization project, 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 – which we call metadata – about each digital resource so that we can find these resources now and in the future. Furthermore if we have to recreate a resource the metadata tells us how we created it the first time, giving us information such as what camera or which scanner we used to create a digital image. All that information goes into the metadata, along with the title, descriptive keywords, and publication data.

Further, the library community is deeply troubled by the "dispersing" of materials from the closed regional libraries and the pesticide library here in Washington, DC. What this "dispersement" entails isn't clear at this point. We are concerned about how this information has been handled, causing long-term damage to the EPA’s effectiveness 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 have been 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), an international database of the 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 information of the closed libraries?

EPA representatives have discussed the creation of 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 what libraries call 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 allow it to be viewed only by those authorized to view it. The DAM controls all of that through its authentication system.

Preservation of 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 acceptable media for preservation. Networked storage

combined with retention of two or three physical copies in different repositories is best preservation practice.

Without more detailed information about the EPA's digitization project, we cannot assess whether it is 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.

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, who do not wish to be identified, that hundreds of valuable journals and books may have been destroyed. These staff members are concerned that materials which are unique to EPA (and in some cases exist nowhere else in the world) are no longer available.

EPA has also claimed in the past 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 are weeded because they are out of date, in poor condition or are unneeded

multiple copies. ALA's weeding standards were never intended for application in a digital environment.

While EPA has met with ALA staff on several occasions to discuss this issue, it has consistently failed to act upon the advice that came as a result of these meetings.

This 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 government records and publications and how they provide access to them. The process of library improvements and/or closures – which directly impacts access to these government materials – needs to be coherent and user-focused, and there must be proper planning and oversight of the process. The Government is the largest single 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.

Our second concern is what this means for the EPA's information specialists, its librarians.

ALA understands that we are living in the 21st century, and users can access much of what they need from their own desks. 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, c) determine the best way to make the information available to those users, and d) assure that digitization projects adhere to standards. 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

understandably wonder about the veracity of the data and will need the assistance of a librarian

Librarians are also needed to design the interfaces. The web makes it possible to design customized interfaces – one for scientists, one for teachers and students, and one for the general public.

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 collections are vast and deep, 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 clearly 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 to:

a) Discuss with stakeholders on how best to meet user needs and plan for the future;
b) Base its actions upon these users' needs;
c) Stabilize and inventory the collections that have been put in storage;
d) Develop and implement a government-wide process to assist agencies to design effective digitization programs; and

e) Reestablish the standard that federal government librarians manage federal government libraries.

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.