Why pull the plug on EPA library?

Federal agency says it will save $2 million, but this action seems like an attempt to hurt decision-making

BY INGRID REDMAN

If documents that could help protect the country from terrorist attacks suddenly were removed from open shelves and stored away in a basement cafeteria where nobody could access them, there would be a flurry of media attention.

Yet, when this began happening to information that scientists rely on to protect the American public from industrial polluters and other environmental threats, barely a peep was heard.

Unless you read the Federal Register, you may not be aware that the Environmental Protection Agency is quietly shutting down its 35-year-old national library system with unwarranted haste. EPA libraries are used by concerned citizens, universities and EPA staff to study critical issues such as air pollution, hazardous waste and threats to children's health.

In 2005, EPA libraries provided some 41,000 reference checks to EPA staff alone. Despite such heavy usage, the agency recently closed its headquarters library in Washington and three regional libraries serving 15 states. The regional library serving New York was spared, but with only one librarian remaining on staff it has reduced access to EPA employees and will soon no longer welcome walk-ins from the public or buy books or journals.

To aggravate matters, EPA closed the specialized Office of Prevention, Pollution and Toxic Substances Library in October without notice, which is required by federal policy when "significant information dissemination products" are to be terminated. The unique collection of this library, which contained studies on the potential effects of chemicals on children and extensive literature on emergency planning, is being stored in a basement cafeteria in Washington, says the watchdog group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. Even more shocking, many materials were directed to be tossed out.

Why would the agency entrusted with protecting human health and the environment eliminate resources crucial to supporting its mission? EPA says it's about budget cuts and shifting to an online environment.

More likely, it's an attempt to weaken the EPA's oversight and thwart decision-making based on sound science. In anticipation of budget cuts proposed by the Bush administration and yet to be approved by Congress, EPA would eliminate or reduce library services to save a meager $2 million. This, though a 2004 EPA report found full library access saved the agency about 214,000 hours, or $7.5 million, in professional staff time a year.

In a June letter to Congress, unions representing some 10,000 EPA employees said the agency's actions would impair the ability of staffers to perform their jobs effectively and respond to emergencies. Considering EPA's pivotal role in responding to threats such as the release of hazardous chemicals into the water supply, any obstacles hindering quick access to data could have fatal consequences.

EPA spokeswoman Suzanne Ackerman said all unique documents from the closed libraries will be available online by January 2007 and full digitization (copies of original documents) will take two to three years. An EPA librarian I spoke with expressed shock at this, saying: "I don't see how that is possible."

EPA librarians worry that thousands of unique documents may sit for years in storage waiting for the funding needed to scan them. What's more, in the midst of the agency's supposed support for increased online access, it has canceled subscriptions to heavily used online resources. Considering that the proposed budget cuts for EPA will not be reviewed until the new Congress convenes next year, one wonders why EPA is in such a hurry. Some contend the rush is an attempt to pre-empt congressional intervention.

Last month, the medical journal The Lancet published a study online saying industrial chemicals seeping into our environment may be causing a "silent pandemic" of brain diseases in children worldwide, leading to lower IQs and billions of dollars in lost productivity. With such dire consequences just beginning to be understood, now is hardly the time to be cutting back our ability to investigate and mitigate chemical threats in our environment.

Ingrid Redman is a librarian at Polytechnic University.