

Testimony of Molly A. O'Neill
Assistant Administrator for Environmental Information and
Chief Information Officer
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Before the House Committee on Science and Technology
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

March 13, 2008

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the progress EPA is making in strengthening its National Library Network and ensuring that the information our employees and the American public need to make sound decisions about their environment is available to them. This testimony reflects my dual roles as the Chief Information Officer (CIO) at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and as the Assistant Administrator of the Office of Environmental Information (OEI), where the National Library Network is now one of the programs I oversee.

Introduction

Let me begin by saying that I am fully committed to enhancing the EPA National Library Network (Network) and providing the broadest possible access to environmental information for EPA staff and the public. As EPA's CIO, I am very much aware of the opportunities that technology offers us to make more environmental information accessible to an ever growing number of users, both EPA staff and the public, regardless of their location. However, I also understand that some users need access in more traditional formats and that our professional librarians play a valuable role in assisting

our library users. Our vision is to be the premier model for the next generation of federal libraries by enhancing our electronic tools to complement our traditional library services.

The Network is comprised of twenty-six libraries, and provides multiple methods for delivering information services -- walk-in access to collections and assistance, on-line resources, and interlibrary loans. To ensure that the Network was evolving and keeping pace with newer demands from a growing, diverse customer base, EPA began re-examining its library model in 2003 to identify new ways to deliver library services and meet customer needs in a cost-effective manner. While EPA implemented changes in walk-in services in some locations in 2006, we continued to provide the full range of library services to EPA staff and the public.

EPA appreciates the thorough review the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently conducted of the EPA Library Network operations. EPA recognizes the importance of transparency in our library planning processes and worked hard to cooperate and assist GAO during its review. The Agency has already taken many steps that address the recommendations made in GAO's review.

Enhancing EPA's Library Network

We placed a 90-day moratorium on any changes at our libraries in mid-December 2006 in response to concerns raised by a number of stakeholders. In late February 2007, this moratorium was extended indefinitely in an effort to work more closely with various concerned groups. Since then, EPA has taken many steps to improve governance and coordination across EPA on enhancing library services.

In early 2007, EPA issued an interim National Library Network Policy assigning the overall responsibility for the Library Network to the Assistant Administrator of the Office of Environmental Information. The policy established uniform governance and

management for the Network, applicable to all headquarters and regional offices that provide library services. To implement the policy, a number of Network-level procedures and standards are being developed that will ensure commonality in the way libraries operate across the Network.

At the same time the policy was issued EPA hired a highly qualified professional librarian with many years of experience as the Network national program manager. The new program manager coordinates all Network activities, and provides strategic direction in all planning, operations, and outreach efforts. These actions have been instrumental in strengthening our network of librarians.

EPA also increased outreach to outside parties on our library operations and plans. We participated in a number of meetings and conferences with professional associations such as the American Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, and the Union of Concerned Scientists. Whether as speakers at national meetings, exhibitors during the meetings, or in open conversation with association staff or members, we have requested input on Network operations, service delivery and future plans for the Network. We have also provided additional information online for the general public about our library operations and future plans.

The Agency has also stepped up coordination with other Federal agencies on library operations. My staff is working closely with the Federal Library and Information Center Committee (FLICC) at the Library of Congress on our plans for the future of the Network. FLICC has selected a board of advisors composed of federal library managers to work directly with the Network to advise us on procedures, operations, and future directions.

I want to assure the Subcommittee that as EPA implemented improvements to the Network, we continued to provide library services to our customers. Customers continued to have access to documents, either in person or via interlibrary loans. They received help in answering reference and research questions, and the Agency continues to enhance our offerings available from our digital libraries. EPA employees now have electronic access to more than 120,000 resources from their desktops. Also, we established agreements between several of our libraries and Centers of Excellence within the Network to allow us to leverage the expertise available from other locations. Users of the services offered via these agreements report high satisfaction with the quality and timeliness of these services. For example, a 2007 survey of federal customers who requested literature searches rated EPA high in the relevance, timeliness and completeness of results.

Moving Forward

EPA continues to develop a long range plan for a strong and effective Library Network, and will continue to solicit input from both internal and external customers. In recognition of our goal to provide the service our customers need we will be conducting a formal needs assessment to inform future planning for the Network. Of particular importance is ensuring EPA staff has access to the information they need to do their jobs, and EPA is committed to working collaboratively with EPA staff and union representatives on future changes to the EPA Library Network that may impact employees.

As part of the planning efforts, EPA is currently working on a Report to Congress pertaining to EPA libraries requested in the report language on the Consolidated

Appropriations Act of 2008. The report language directs EPA “to restore the Network of EPA libraries recently closed or consolidated ...” and “to submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations regarding actions it will take to restore publicly available libraries to provide environmental information and data to each EPA region within 90 days of enactment of this Act”. EPA’s report will describe the Agency’s plans to ensure on-site support in each EPA Region, the EPA Headquarters Library, and the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances (OPPTS) Chemical Library.

Finally, EPA is committed to examining ways to provide even greater access to environmental information to meet customers’ needs. I believe that all of the Agency’s information access services, be they through EPA libraries, the EPA Website, or other Agency mechanisms, are components of a broader canvas that supports our commitment to provide access to environmental information. To solicit input on how EPA might enhance access to information, the Agency is conducting a National Dialogue with key stakeholders over the next several months. Based on this input, EPA plans to develop a long term Strategy for enhancing access to environmental information, including library services.

Conclusion

On behalf of Administrator Johnson, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about the EPA National Library Network and our ongoing work to strengthen it and make it the premier environmental library network in the country. I would be happy to address any questions that you may have at this time.