

Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) library network provides agency staff and the public with access to environmental information. A 2006 attempt by EPA to reorganize its network by consolidating libraries and making more materials and services available online caused concern among users, and in 2007, EPA put a moratorium on its reorganization plans. Congress requested that GAO report on the reorganization and has again requested a follow-up on these issues.

Accordingly, GAO reviewed (1) the status of EPA's overall strategy for its library network, (2) the status of EPA's plan to reopen the libraries it closed and other actions planned or taken, (3) EPA's efforts to digitize printed documents to make them electronically available, and (4) EPA's efforts to communicate with staff and other stakeholders about its library network. GAO reviewed regulations and agency funding and inventory documents and interviewed EPA staff and contractors, as well as independent library professionals. GAO also assessed the reliability of EPA's data on library holdings and from EPA's staff survey on library use and needs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other actions, that EPA complete its strategic plan for the library network and ensure that survey methods provide reliable data on which to base decisions. With clarifications, EPA concurred with our recommendations.

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

EPA Needs to Complete a Strategy for Its Library Network to Meet Users' Needs

What GAO Found

Although EPA has taken a number of steps to meet the needs of library users, it has not completed a plan identifying an overall strategy for its library network, with implementation goals and a timeline of what it intends to accomplish. Scheduled for completion in 2008, the strategic plan was to provide EPA staff and the public a detailed view of EPA's library operations and future direction. The draft outline of the strategic plan, however, is largely a placeholder list of current and planned EPA activities. For example, while it emphasizes the central role to be played by electronic library resources, the draft outline does not contain goals or a timeline for completing an inventory of holdings or digitizing those holdings. The draft outline also does not set out details of how funding decisions are to be made. Given the current economic environment, without a completed strategic plan, including a detailed strategy for acquiring, deploying, and managing funding, EPA may find itself hard-pressed to ensure that the network can meet its users' needs.

The agency has reopened libraries closed during reorganization, although about half the network's 10 regional libraries are operating with reduced hours. EPA has also developed standards for the regional and headquarters libraries' use of space, on-site collections, staffing, and services. The agency has also hired a national library program manager to carry out day-to-day activities and bring focus and cohesion to the network. Working closely with EPA management and library staff, the national library program manager, who is responsible for library network strategic planning, has set in motion a number of actions meant to improve library network operation and communication, including working closely with internal and external advisory boards and creating a library policy and related procedures.

EPA has resumed digitizing some of its libraries' documents, although it has not inventoried the network's holdings. The agency is digitizing documents in three phases. Phase 1 was completed in January 2007, phase 2 is scheduled for completion in December 2010, and planning has begun for phase 3. Because EPA has not taken a complete inventory of its library holdings, however, it cannot determine which documents, or how many, will need to be digitized and, consequently, cannot accurately estimate the total cost of digitization or how long it will take.

Since we reported on the library network reorganization in 2008, EPA has taken steps to communicate with staff and other stakeholders about its library network, including providing information about the libraries and soliciting information from library users. EPA has also made improvements to the main Internet gateway to the network, making more documents available electronically and providing better access to electronic documents and services. Nevertheless, because EPA's 2009 survey of the information needs and library use of its staff had methodological flaws—similar to those GAO identified in 2008—the agency is unlikely to obtain accurate information that would enable it to make appropriate decisions on the corrective actions that would best address library users' needs.