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OPINION

Wednesday, December 6, 2006

Bush White House blocks information to EPA libraries

JOEL A. MINTZ AND REBECCA BRATSPIES
GUEST COLUMNISTS

One of the hallmarks of the Bush administration's six-year effort to undercut environmental protection has been its contempt for the free flow of information.

Early on, the White House rewrote conclusions of the Environmental Protection Agency's scientists on global warming. Then it refused to disclose which companies and lobbyists helped draft its energy policy. Now it is seeking to weaken the Toxic Release Inventory, the 20-year-old law that requires polluters to disclose publicly the extent of their pollution.

Most recently, the White House opened a new front in the battle by closing the main library at the Environmental Protection Agency's Washington, D.C., headquarters. The library served both the general public and the agency's own staff, making available detailed scientific information vital to the nitty-gritty work of environmental protection.

That decision, ostensibly for budgetary reasons, came on the heels of shuttering the EPA's regional libraries in Chicago, Dallas and Kansas City, and reducing hours and public access in the libraries in Boston, New York City, San Francisco and Seattle.

In announcing the closures, the Bush administration asserted that the EPA's staff and the public could access the information they require through EPA Web sites. That would be fine if it were true. But the vast majority of the documents in the EPA libraries are not digitized, and no funding has been appropriated to do the job. Closing the libraries renders thousands of vital documents inaccessible.

EPA scientists, enforcement agents and technical experts need and depend upon the materials in the agency's libraries to do their jobs. Until they were closed, the libraries fielded no fewer than 134,000 information requests per year from staff. Among other things, the EPA's experts used the libraries to gather data urgently needed to respond to emergencies -- toxic chemical fires and spills, and chemical plant explosions, for example, to prepare for important enforcement negotiations with polluters, and to assist in tasks related to key technical aspects of national security.

With just those sorts of concerns in mind, representatives of more than 10,000 EPA scientists, engineers, environmental protection specialists and support staff signed a letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee vigorously objecting to the closures. The plea fell on deaf ears.

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The public has also put the libraries to good use. Community groups concerned about local water contamination use EPA libraries to understand who dumped what and when, sometimes as a precursor to suing polluters for the damage they have caused. The closures leave a huge gap in publicly available information of that sort. Nowhere else could people study the full history of industrial pollution in a watershed. The EPA apparently plans to charge for access to this kind of information in the future, when access is even possible.

It's ironic that closing the libraries won't save all that much money. The EPA's libraries already were cost-efficient, and as a percentage of the EPA's overall budget, savings will be minuscule.

The closures deal a serious blow to the EPA's ability to protect human health and the environment, and are another in a long series of demonstrations of contempt for the public's right to know. The EPA's environmental scientists and experts need ready access to information that can help them do their jobs, and the public needs the same so it can expose regulators and the regulated alike to scrutiny.

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