

Highlights of NCLIS meeting on NTIS closing proposal

Many academic librarians, special librarians and researchers are concerned about an important government information issue—the Commerce Department's proposal to close the National Technical Information Service (NTIS). The threat of closing NTIS and transferring its functions to the Library of Congress raises serious questions about access to government scientific and technical information (STI).

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) held its third, and probably final, public meeting in Washington on February 29. Librarians and the Government Printing Office (GPO) played prominent roles at the meeting, convened by Acting Chair of NCLIS Martha Gould.

Comments were sought in response to the document, "Emerging Consensus Position Paper: Proposed NTIS Closure and Transfer" (see <http://www.nclis.gov/info/ntis/ntis.html>). John Stevenson, documents coordinator at the University of Delaware and active Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) member, represented ALA. Stevenson presented key points in a letter from ALA Committee on Legislation Chair Chadwick Raymond. The letter was drafted with input from the ALA Committee on Legislation and its Government Information Subcommittee with GODORT and ACRL Science and Technology Section representatives.

Attached to the letter was the ALA Council resolution passed at the 2000 Midwinter Meeting. The resolution, "Resolution on No-Fee Permanent Public Access to Scientific and Technical Information (STI)," recommends that NTIS be transferred to GPO. ALA's letter and resolution argued in part that:

- there are economies of scale in transferring NTIS to GPO, given the similar functions and missions of GPO and NTIS;
- making NTIS materials available to the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP)

broadens public access and serves the public good; and

- the nature of NTIS functions—to provide government scientific and technical information—is inherently a governmental function that should be supported by federal appropriations.


Stevenson added that to say that the NCLIS document suggested consensus, whether "emerging" or not, did not reflect ALA's position. Other participants made similar comments about the nature of the "consensus."

Miriam Drake, dean and director of libraries at Georgia Institute of Technology (a major NTIS user), spoke about the need for scientists and researchers to have the level of cataloguing and abstracts presently provided by NTIS. She questioned whether GPO cataloging standards will meet those needs and expectations. Also discussed were the different types of users of NTIS services versus what some describe as the more general public served by GPO. Another speaker compared NTIS to a "boutique" and GPO to a "Wal-Mart."

In general, the comments from the participants supported keeping NTIS at the Commerce Department. Other than ALA and GPO, no one clearly advocated for the NTIS functions to go to GPO. Everyone agreed on two things: that there should be further study on the issue, and steps must be taken to protect NTIS from losing more staff and resources—leading to a deterioration in services—while the debate continues in Congress.

There is no clear indication of intentions or timeline from Congress on the NTIS debate. Some observers suggest there will be immediate congressional action; others say it may be a slow process. There is some urgency, however. NTIS is losing experienced staff.

The congressional appropriations process soon will need to decide whether to provide funding to close NTIS or to keep it operating as is for an interim period. The ALA Office of Government Relations will make further reports as more information becomes available. ■



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