

# Government information: A call to action

Access to government information continues to be a high legislative priority. ALA is committed to working to support government's obligation to create and disseminate easy-to-use government information. To assist the lobbying efforts of the ALA Washington Office, the Government Relations Committee would like to encourage ACRL members to send stories that clearly illustrate the value of government information in education, research, and public affairs. Effective lobbying is often a result of bringing the message home for the legislator. Following is an example of a story taking place in Florida.

## **Restoration of the Everglades**

The largest environmental restoration project in the history of the world is underway in south Florida. A multi-agency Federal Task Force, a Governor's Commission, the Seminole and Miccosukee Indian tribes, numerous environmental groups, state agencies, and hundreds of researchers are all involved in restoration of the Everglades. A common thread of need throughout the process is access to government information. Thousands of studies, reports, maps, and monographs have been published by federal agencies since the early 1920s detailing treatments and remedies to "problems" in the Florida Everglades.

The Everglades exist in a swath between the rapidly growing Atlantic and Gulf coasts of Florida and are surrounded by sugar, citrus, and winter vegetable growers. In recognition of the pressures being exerted upon the Everglades and that many of the treatments and remedies done to the Everglades have created additional problems, the 104th Congress 1995 (S.640, section 207) passed the Everglades and South Florida ecosystem restoration bill. On the state level, the Florida Legislature passed the Everglades Forever Act, 1994. Money has been appropriated and work has begun on restoration efforts.

## **The history of the river**

An example of how the information is being collected and used for researchers involved in Everglades restoration is a small project at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), funded by the South Florida Water Management District. The Caloosahatchee River is a major river flowing from Lake Okeechobee out to the Gulf of Mexico. The river has been

dredged, diked, and managed since the early part of the 1920s, initially to stop floods and then to serve as a link in the inter-coastal waterway from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico. The South Florida Water Management District is attempting to study the Caloosahatchee watershed to see what has happened to the watershed over the past 70 or 80 years. FGCU is collecting all of the documents available to write a history of the river and make the documents accessible to researchers through the Web. This project is made possible because most of the materials are government documents, are in the public domain, and are freely available to the public through government depository programs.

The outcome of this project is twofold: first, a history of the river and the watershed will document the treatments and remedies and their impact on the Everglades to the south of the river; and second, the combined collection of local, state, and federal documents will provide a single resource base for researchers to understand the studies conducted, the changes over time, and will help researchers define a research agenda for the future. The ideal outcome will be for policy makers, researchers, and environmental groups to realize the importance of a coordinated effort to avoid the costly mistakes of the past.

The wealth of information available to review is staggering and the accumulated data are helping policymakers and scientists come up with strategies for restoration. Without the availability of government documents collected and preserved through the Federal Depository Program, many of the crucial pieces of information may very well have been lost.

## **Send your stories**

Academic librarians in particular need to find real life examples and develop stories that illustrate the strategic value of government documents for research and education. The ALA Washington office can use these stories in their lobbying efforts with Congress. Please share your stories by sending them to Michael Godow at ACRL: [mgodow@ala.org](mailto:mgodow@ala.org).—*Carolyn M. Gray is chair ACRL Government Relations Committee, and dean of library services at Florida Gulf Coast University; [cgray@fgcu.edu](mailto:cgray@fgcu.edu)*