

The Federal Depository Library Program Regional Collection in Oregon: Shifting Roles in Access and Preservation of U.S. Government Publications

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Summary

This article explores the history of the FDLP Regional Collection in Oregon libraries. It covers the origin and evolution of the collection which is currently managed by the State Library of Oregon by way of shared housing agreements. The transition away from print-based to digital access points to a shift in role for the collection, with more emphasis on long-term preservation. This shift prompts an examination of options for improving the management of the collection.

History

Since Oregon's territorial days, predecessors of the current State Library collected and maintained U.S. government publications to help Oregonians stay connected and informed about the U.S. federal government. Since 1861, the primary source for these publications has been the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO, formerly Government Printing Office). While the deposit of publications in libraries was not consistent in its early years, GPO reformed its program and established the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) in 1895. Its mission is to distribute publications to designated libraries, so they might provide free, ready, and permanent public access to federal government publications throughout the country.

When the State Library was organized into its current configuration in 1905, many of the federal publications in earlier government libraries were consolidated into the library's collection. While this history makes it difficult to establish a precise date for the beginning of the State Library's participation in the FDLP, it is clear from an examination of the historical material in the collection that it reflects those early efforts to distribute U.S. government publications to Oregon. Other Oregon libraries with historical collections and long participation in the program include: University of Oregon (1883), Multnomah County Library (1884), Pacific University (1897), Oregon State University (1907), and Reed College (1912).



While free access to government information is the FDLP's founding principle, the housing of federal government publications in the geographically-dispersed program also helps to assure these publications are preserved for future generations. Preservation goals were particularly realized through program revisions in 1962 that established Regional depository libraries. This structure mandated that each state designate a Regional depository library to receive all publications distributed through the program and retain them permanently, allowing other libraries to selectively receive only those that best meet the needs of the local community. This change assured access at the state level, since libraries could turn to the Regional depository library to request materials as they were needed. It also built permanent and comprehensive Regional collections across the country that have become a treasure trove of primary documents that serve as an archive of the history of the U.S. government.

Recognizing the challenge of maintaining growing permanent collections, depository libraries with large federal collections in Oregon (including the State Library) did not initially step up to receive a Regional designation. It wasn't until 1972 that the relatively new depository library at Portland State University (PSU) took on that role. Since consolidation of historical collections did not take place, a true comprehensive Regional federal depository collection did not emerge in Oregon at a single library as it did in other states. While PSU did develop its Regional collection with current publications received from GPO, Oregon librarians turned to other libraries with particular historical collection strengths to research and access information, such as the University of Oregon (Congressional materials) and Oregon State University (agriculture and forestry publications).

The growth of online publishing by federal agencies in the mid-1990s began a new era of increased access to federal information, placing less emphasis on physical collections as the source for current government information. This shift combined with staffing changes at PSU necessitated a review of the Regional collection configuration in Oregon in the mid-2000s. With the blessing of GPO and Oregon's U.S. Senators (who designate Regional depository libraries), the State Library took over the Regional designation in 2007.

Oregon Federal Regional Collection

University of Oregon

Smithsonian
State Department
Presidential reports
Congressional publications
and hearings

Portland State University

Defense
Justice
Labor
Transportation
Congressional Record

State Library of Oregon

National Archives
Health and Human Services
Library of Congress

Oregon State University

Agriculture
Forest Service
U.S. Geological Survey
National Park Service
NOAA / NASA



Since that time, the State Library has coordinated the housing of Oregon's Regional collection among formally-recognized Regional partner libraries, Portland State University, University of Oregon, and Oregon State University. Each partnering library maintains portions of the Regional collection divided by publishing agency. (See Oregon Federal Regional Collection graphic). This distributed model recognized the historical collection strengths at each institution while preventing a single library from bearing the full burden of housing and managing the large collection.

Challenges

The publications physically distributed to libraries through the FDLDP have continued to decrease as GPO and other federal agencies have embraced digital publishing. Agencies and libraries are also working to convert historical publications to digital formats. A freely-accessible comprehensive collection of digital federal publications is not yet available, although several national initiatives are progressing in that direction. Many Oregon depository libraries have downsized or eliminated their printed federal collections in favor of easier to manage and access digital publications.

Regional depository libraries are still required to maintain tangible collections, although the emphasis and value of the collection now center on serving as a backup to digital versions or as an archival record of government publishing. GPO has introduced more flexibility around the requirement for permanent holdings as they are able to assure perpetual digital access to certain publications. Even with this flexibility, it remains challenging to manage Oregon's Regional collection.

For a variety of reasons, Oregon's Regional partner libraries did not locally catalog their federal collections until GPO records became more easily accessible in the mid-1990s. Portions of the Regional collection, particularly pre-1990 publications, are "hidden" from other Oregon libraries. Without complete holdings represented in databases such as OCLC's WorldCat, it is difficult for Oregon libraries to accurately identify whether specific titles are available. Inefficiencies and delayed delivery times result when libraries borrow from out-of-state libraries when material is actually available in Oregon.

Uncataloged titles also inhibit the ability of the Regional Partner libraries to effectively manage and assure a complete inventory of the Regional Collection. Since federal collections are now less used, it makes sense to consider off-site storage as a way to free up library space and preserve collections. Off-site management of library collections only succeeds when holdings records are available to easily identify titles for retrieval. Without accurate catalog and holding records, it can also become difficult to assess collection gaps, as staff are forced to manually assess collections for completeness.

Solutions

The State Library recently took steps to address the lack of cataloging for Oregon's Regional collection. With State Library Board approval, LSTA funds from FY 2020 are being used for a temporary cataloger to work with PSU staff to tackle uncataloged publications from the U.S. Census Bureau and Department of Defense. Despite the difficulty of working with collections during an extended library closure due to the pandemic, the project has resulted in 9,000 volumes being added to the PSU library catalog. Assuming LSTA funding remains stable, the State Library hopes to continue funding this position and work on collections at the other Regional partner libraries into the future.



GPO continues to support Regional depository libraries and their partners as they explore distributed models for housing collections. As delivery systems and digitization have evolved, the need for Regional collections to be replicated in each state diminishes. Several states have completed “shared regional” agreements where Regional depository libraries in contiguous states collaborate on collection management and divide housing responsibilities. These interstate agreements can leverage existing relationships to build actual regional, rather than state-based collections. The Pacific Northwest is a region where this model has potential, given the existence of collaborative services such as the courier and shared catalog managed by the Orbis Cascade Alliance. With model agreements and improved holdings information, the State Library expects to explore opportunities to build an interstate model to help sustain the Regional collection into the future.

Federal government publications remain a rich source of documentation for the history of Oregon and the U.S. Digital access has improved libraries’ ability to find and make use of these resources, but the physical collections remain an important part of assuring these resources are permanently preserved and available. New models for housing and improved records for management of the Regional collection will assist the State Library and its partners to meet the ongoing mission of the FDLP, the perpetuation of democratic values through permanent public access to government information. 

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