

FBI May Release Library-Probe Files

By Victoria Churchville
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The FBI has agreed to consider making public thousands of pages of secret documents about its efforts to find spies among library users, acknowledging for the first time that the controversial search was conducted across the nation, according to a stipulation order issued yesterday in U.S. District Court.

Initially, the FBI maintained there were fewer than 100 pages of documents in bureau files that could be released to the public on the program, which it said involved only 21 libraries in New York state. But under yesterday's order, the agency agreed to begin processing more than 3,000 pages of documents related to libraries in at least 13 states, according to Scott Armstrong, executive director of the National Security Archives.

The archive is a Washington research organization in whose name

a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, funded by the People for The American Way, was filed last year.

The FBI also acknowledged in the order that its agents had searched FBI files for possible information on the nation's librarians or library organizations. "That means more than 300 librarians were the subject of a file search," Armstrong said.

An FBI spokesman yesterday declined to comment on the suit, saying that bureau attorneys had not had time to review the nine-page order from U.S. District Court Judge Louis F. Oberdorfer.

FBI Director William S. Sessions has defended the program in congressional testimony as a response to a massive, decades-long effort by Soviet agents to ferret sensitive information from various publications and libraries. Sessions has testified that the FBI program had focused on 21 specialized libraries, mostly around New York City.

But a list attached to Oberdor-

fer's order showed that the FBI had visited more than a dozen other libraries from Princeton University to UCLA, including George Mason University and the University of Maryland.

"The bureau has been going into libraries asking very searching questions about what people with foreign-sounding names or accents have been going into libraries to read or look at. It's a fishing expedition for foreign counterintelligence," said Quinlan J. Shea Jr, special counsel to the archive.

"Why should anybody else be able to find out what books you're checking out and what you're studying?" Shea continued. "That's a very private matter and it should be." He asserted that the FBI probe violated laws in 38 states and the District that require library users' records to be kept confidential.

The lawsuit accused the FBI of deliberately withholding information about the "library awareness program."