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What's Going on at the E.P.A.?

ByCarolynn B. Race

This summer, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.), whose mission “is to protect human health and to safeguard the natural environment – air, water, and land – upon which life depends,” has been in the news for its transitions, most notably the recent resignation of its Administrator, former New Jersey governor Christie Whitman. It has also been the subject of recent criticism – regarding what scientific data it has – and has not – release to the public regarding climate change and evaluations of anti-pollutant legislation. What is happening at the E.P.A., and why are some so upset?

Staff Transitions

Former E.P.A. Administrator Whitman announced her resignation on May 21st, effective June 27th. She cited family reasons for her departure, noting in her resignation letter to President Bush, “As rewarding as the past two-and-a-half years have been for me professionally, it is time to return to my home and husband in New Jersey, which I love just as you do your home state of Texas.”

In her resignation letter, she cited no ill-will toward the Administration. However, environmental groups expressed skepticism regarding her motivation for resigning. Carl Pope, Sierra Club’s Executive Director, noted, “Under the circumstances, Christie Whitman did the best she could at the E.P.A., but the Bush administration simply wouldn’t allow her to do the job.” He cited what he described as a broken campaign pledge by Mr. Bush to curb carbon dioxide emissions as an example. Philip Clapp, the President of the National Environmental Trust, remarked, “Whitman must feel like her own long national nightmare is finally over.”

On July 10th, Marianne L. Horinko, who previously served as Assistant Administrator for Solid Waste and Emergency Response, was appointed E.P.A. Acting Administrator. At press time, no timeframe for a new permanent E.P.A. Administrator had been announced.

Changes Made to E.P.A. *Draft Report on the Environment*

In the midst of these transitions, the E.P.A. has been scrutinized for its approach to releasing (and not releasing) certain scientific data regarding environmental issues. It came under fire for changes made to its *Draft Report on the Environment*, released in June. The E.P.A. describes this report as “its first-ever national picture of the U.S. environment.” (To view a copy of the report, go to <http://www.epa.gov/indicators/roe/html/roeTOC.htm>.) On June 19th, the New York Times noted that after the *Draft Report* was edited by the White House, “a long section describing risks from rising global temperatures [had] been whittled to a few noncommittal paragraphs.” Specifically, the New York Times found that “the editing eliminated references to many studies concluding that warming is at least partly caused

by rising concentrations of smokestack and tail-pipe emissions and could threaten health and ecosystems.”

The New York Times found, based on drafts that it received from a former E.P.A. official, that “among the deletions were conclusions about the likely human contribution to warming from a 2001 report on climate by the National Research Council” and “a reference to a 1999 study showing that global temperatures had risen sharply in the previous decade compared with the last 1,000 years.” The article went on to note that administration officials added instead “a reference to a new study, partly financed by the American Petroleum Institute, questioning that conclusion.”

In the documents acquired by the New York Times, the introductory sentence of the “Global Issues” section was changed. Before changes it read, “Climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment.” It was changed to, “The complexity of the Earth system and the interconnections among its components make it a scientific challenge to document change, diagnose its causes, and develop useful projections of how natural variability and human actions may affect the global environment in the future.”

Following these suggested changes to the draft, E.P.A. staff decided to delete the entire section on climate “to avoid criticism that they were selectively filtering science to suit policy.” The article noted that changes to the *Draft Report* were mainly made by the President’s Council on Environmental Quality (www.whitehouse.gov/ceq) and that the Office on Management and Budget (www.whitehouse.gov/omb) was also involved.

Concealed Clean Air Data

In June and July, a number of media outlets reported that the E.P.A. withheld analysis, developed in November 2002, detailing the costs and health benefits of the Clean Air Planning Act (S. 843), put forward by Senator Tom Carper (D-DE). The legislation, which is co-sponsored by Republican Senators Gregg (NH), Chafee (RI), and Alexander (TN), would tighten an existing cap on utility emissions of sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and impose new caps on carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and mercury. E.P.A.’s data showed that Carper’s legislation would cost only marginally more than President Bush’s Clear Skies proposal (which calls for reductions in emissions from three power plant pollutants – sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and mercury), but that Carper’s plan offered better health benefits.

On July 1, *The Washington Post* reported that the E.P.A. had data that showed that the Carper bill “has a carbon dioxide-reduction plan that can be carried out at ‘negligible’ cost to industry.” Mr. Bush has “firmly rejected capping utility CO₂ emissions,” noted *The Washington Post*, and does not include that provision in his legislation. On July 2, *The Energy Daily* reported that EPA’s analysis showed that Carper’s bill would cost \$89.9 billion for the period between 2005 and 2030, while Mr. Bush’s proposal would cost \$65 billion over the same period. But, by 2020, Carper’s bill would result in 17,800 fewer premature deaths from power plant air pollution than would Mr. Bush’s initiative. EPA’s data indicated that that would save \$140 billion a year in health benefits – about \$50 billion more than Clear Skies.

Other Members of Congress have expressed concern that their legislation has not been analyzed by the E.P.A. On July 13th, *The New York Times* wrote that Senator Lieberman (D-CT) said the E.P.A. refused to analyze legislation that he and Senator McCain (R-AZ) sponsored to limit emissions of carbon dioxide. *The New York Times*

then noted that the E.P.A. “routinely assesses important proposals for environmental laws and regulations, using computer modeling to predict their environmental and economic consequences and to calculate their risks and benefits. The results are often used to bolster or attack policy positions.”

What Can Presbyterians Do?

Faced with concerns about what data is released or not released by the E.P.A., those concerned can contact the Acting E.P.A. Administrator Marianne L. Horinko and/or the White House. To contact Administrator Horinko, e-mail horinko.marianne@epa.gov or call 202-564-4700. To contact Mr. Bush, e-mail president@whitehouse.gov or call the White House comment line at 202-456-1111.

Sources:

“Carper Bill Cleaner, More Costly, than Clear Skies – EPA.” *The Energy Daily*, July 2, 2003

Gugliotta, Guy and Pianin, Eric. “EPA Issues Rosier 'Clear Skies' Analysis, Based on New Model: Agency Denies Hiding Data on Rival Bill,” *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2003

Gugliotta, Guy and Pianin, Eric, “EPA Withholds Air Pollution Analysis: Senate Plan Found More Effective, Slightly More Costly Than Bush Proposal,” *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2003

Lee, Jennifer. “Critics Say EPA Won’t Analyze Some Clean Air Proposals.” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2003.

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Revkin, Andrew C. with Katharine Q. Seelye. “Report by EPA Leaves Out Data on Climate Change,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2003.

www.epa.gov

www.senate.gov/~carper

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General Assembly Policy

The 202nd General Assembly (1990) recommends:

*Ecumenical Participation and International Participation

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declares its serious concern, in concert with ecumenical partners, that the global atmospheric warming trend (the greenhouse effect) represents one of the most serious global environmental challenges to the health, security, and stability of human life and natural ecosystems...

*Policies on Global Warming

The United States, as consumer of nearly a quarter of the world's energy, must take the lead in reducing its own combustion of fossil fuels and shifting to renewable sources of energy which do not contribute to the atmospheric buildup of carbon dioxide.

...The U.S. government, other governments, the United Nations, and appropriate scientific organizations should increase their capability to monitor and project trends in atmospheric temperature and to make broad environmental and social assessments. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should act promptly to strengthen fuel economy and emission standards for automobiles, buses, and trucks by mandating and consistently enforcing a schedule of energy efficiency within a few years. Incentives and disincentives to encourage consumers to choose fuel-efficient vehicles will also be in order.

*Policies on Ozone Depletion

To protect the ozone shield, there clearly is need for international action through leadership by the United States, which is the largest contributor to the problem; a longer-term and global frame of reference, with improved foresight capability by governments and international agencies; improved technologies and development of acceptable substitutes for the chemicals that must be phased out; rapid shifts in production processes; assistance to developing countries by providing them with information, training, funding mechanisms, and technology transfers ... strict standards, in line with international agreements but enforced by governments; incentives and disincentives that lead actors in a market economy to make environmentally rational decisions.

What is the E.P.A.?

(Source: E.P.A. Web site, www.epa.gov)

The mission of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is to protect human health and to safeguard the natural environment – air, water, and land – upon which life depends.

EPA's purpose is to ensure that all Americans are protected from significant risks to human health and the environment where they live, learn and work.

National efforts to reduce environmental risk are based on the best available scientific information.

Federal laws protecting human health and the environment are enforced fairly and effectively.

Environmental protection is an integral consideration in U.S. policies concerning natural resources, human health, economic growth, energy, transportation, agriculture, industry, and international trade, and these factors are similarly considered in establishing environmental policy.

All parts of society--communities, individuals, business, state and local governments, tribal governments--have access to accurate information sufficient to effectively participate in managing human health and environmental risks.

Environmental protection contributes to making our communities and ecosystems diverse, sustainable and economically productive.

The United States plays a leadership role in working with other nations to protect the global environment.