



EPA Budget Triggers Partisan Clash

Democrats and Republicans clashed over spending levels and policy proposals as the Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works opened hearings on President Bush's proposed budget for the Environmental Protection Agency.

Sen. Robert Smith, R-N.H., chairman of the committee at the time the hearings opened, said the spending plan for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 was "environmentally protective and fiscally disciplined." At the same time, he said, "Clean Water Infrastructure funding is substantially higher than that of any previous administration."

Smith also said the plan calls for "smarter management...in contrast to the previous administration, where efficiency and smart management seemed beyond reach."

But Sen. Jon S. Corzine said in comments echoed by several other Democrats on the committee that the new administration's budget request for EPA "is simply inadequate to address the environmental needs of a growing nation." Noting the five-year projections in the budget, Corzine said that "the president's budget makes real dollar reductions to EPA every year for five years."

Environmental Panel Gets New Chairman

A shift in political control of the Senate temporarily has put Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., in the chairmanship of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

One result of that change is expected to be yet another switch in the direction of the panel, which now has had three chairmen in less than a year.

Upon the death of Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I., who had headed the committee, the top spot went to Smith. While Chafee had been considered a strong advocate of EPA and its approach to regulation and enforcement, Smith's arrival marked a sharp turn toward policies that challenged many of the agency's regulatory initiatives and favored giving states greater responsibilities for anti-pollution actions.

Final reorganization of the Senate committees was still pending at press time. In that shift, Jeffords is expected to take the chairmanship of the Environmental Committee.

All Senate committees went from Republican to Democratic control last month when Republican Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont became an independent but voted with the Democrats on the organization of the chamber, giving that party a 51-49 edge.

EPA Finalizes Filter Backwash Rule

A regulation covering recycling of filter backwash water has been finalized by EPA.

Termed the Filter Backwash Recycling Rule (FBBR), the new regulation requires public water systems to review their recycle practices and, where appropriate, work with their state primary agencies to change practices that might be compromising microbial control.

The rule applies to systems that use surface water or groundwater that is under the direct influence of surface water, utilize direct or conventional filtration processes and recycle spent filter backwash water, sludge thickener supernatant or liquids from dewatering processes.

Under the rule, systems will be required to return recycled filter backwash water, sludge thickener supernatant and liquids from dewatering to a location that utilizes all processes of a system's conventional or direct filtration means. EPA anticipates that the rule will cover 4,650 systems serving 35 million customers.

A technical fact sheet on the rule is available online at http://epa.gov/safewater/mdbp/fbrr_factsheet.html.

Agency Withdraws Rule On Test Procedures

A direct final rule that EPA issued in January on test procedures has been withdrawn by the agency.

The initial action approved the use of updated versions of test procedures such as analytical methods for determining whether chemical, radiological and microbiological pollutants and contaminants were present in drinking water.

In rescinding that step, EPA announced that it would withdraw the rule if it received adverse comment on it by March 19. Such comments were received, the agency said, and they will be addressed.

President Chooses EPA's Top Water Official

G. Tracy Mehan, who has held federal and state environmental positions, has been nominated by President Bush as EPA's assistant administrator for water.

The position has responsibility for the management of programs, policies, standards and regulations related to water issues.

At the time of his appointment, Mehan, 51, was director of Michigan's Office of the Great Lakes. He was earlier an associate deputy administrator in the EPA administrator's office, and director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

Class V Well Controls Deemed Adequate

Existing federal rules and state programs on Class V underground injection wells are adequate to protect drinking water supplies, EPA has announced. "Additional federal regulation is not necessary at this time," the agency said.

Class V injection wells are generally shallow systems for disposal of nonhazardous fluids. They are regulated under Safe Drinking Water Act provisions designed to protect underground water sources from contamination by such wells.

EPA estimates there are more than 650,000 Class V wells in the country and they are in every state. The agency commented that "The effective management of Class V wells is important because of their large number, the wide variety of fluids discharged into them and because most accessible fresh water is stored in underground aquifers." ■