



Science Project

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill (HR 64) that would create a new deputy director for science and technology at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The new administrator would coordinate science across the entire agency and would yield much greater influence than that of EPA's current highest-ranking scientist.

"Many people believe that the EPA does not always base its regulatory decisions on strong scientific evidence," said Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.) who was one of the authors of the bill. "I believe (HR 64) will help change this perception and ensure that science informs and infuses regulatory work of the EPA."

In the present system, the EPA administrator has one deputy and nine assistant administrators. Usually, the assistant administrator that heads the Office of Research and Development (ORD) is the agency's highest-ranking scientist. However, many other EPA offices perform scientific research and the head of the ORD does not necessarily have the final say or even participate in regulatory decision-making.

Ehlers hopes that this new position will raise the profile of scientific considerations in the agency's regulatory decisions and improve the quality of EPA's research. In addition, the bill makes the head of ORD a non-political appointee with a five-year term and the title of chief scientist.

The creation of a new deputy administrator was recommended by a National Research Council (NRC) report

released back in June 2000. Of course, since that time "sound science" has come up in the arsenic limit change debate, and recently a study by the National Academy of Sciences stated the federal decision to favor fish over farmers' crops in Oregon's Klamath River Basin was not based on sound science.

EPA Administrator Christie Whitman was opposed to creating a new high level position. She said she has already taken steps to designate one of her top assistants as a science adviser and has moved to expand the use of sound science in decisions. Early in his tenure, President Bush issued Executive Order 12898 that aimed to "ensure that the (EPA's) environmental policies are based on sound science."

Of course, sound science is a concept both Republicans and Democrats can agree on. The problem is everyone has a different idea of exactly what it is. In the past, scientific truth was a battle among interest groups that push a point of view, commission studies to prove they are right and then lobby to change laws and regulations.

Hopefully, the creation of a non-partisan "science czar" will help sort out the interests from the greater good on complex issues. Unfortunately, it is seldom clear which set of assumptions and answers are correct in questions of science. Politics will always intervene in Washington. In fact, the bill still needs to pass in the Senate.

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