

# Rule may allow officials to play role of scientists in toxic chemical regulation

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The Obama administration has promised to end political meddling in scientific decisions, but some critics say the White House has botched an early test of that pledge on a key question of public health: how to assess the danger of industrial chemicals.

At issue is a government catalog of toxic substances that guides regulators, industries and the public on the dangers posed by certain chemicals. Environmentalists believe the hazards should be assessed solely by scientists free from political influence. But new guidelines issued last month by the Environmental Protection Agency carve out a role for "[White House](#) officials" \_ potentially giving presidential aides the ability to influence scientific deliberations.

The question of political interference is sensitive, coming as critics in Congress and elsewhere say the administration of former President George W. Bush undermined the toxic chemical database by creating delays and adding policy preferences.

Critics say they were hoping Obama would do more to remove politics from the process.

"Instead of leaving scientists free to do their work, the Obama administration has invited interference from people interested in politics and economics," said Rena Steinzor, a law professor who chairs the Center for Progressive Reform, which advocates strong regulation. "The

Obama White House has just provided a back door for special interest obstruction."

House and Senate Democrats, including California Sen. Barbara Boxer, who leads the Environment and Public Works Committee, are now requesting clarification of the role Obama aides might play in evaluating chemical hazards.

"The ultimate question is whether EPA scientists are controlling this or whether it's the political guys" at the White House, said Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., chairman of a House Science subcommittee.

Both Miller and Boxer said that, overall, they were pleased with Obama's new rules regarding the catalog of chemicals.

The new guidelines, issued May 20, were designed to speed the updating of the database and to require more transparency.

How the government assesses the dangers of chemicals such as dioxin, perchlorate or formaldehyde that are commonly used by industry has been a controversy for years.

The EPA's hazardous chemical database, known as the Integrated Risk Information System, was created in 1985 as a way to provide regulators with reliable scientific information on the risk of exposure to particular chemicals. Since then it has expanded to cover more than 500 chemicals, and the information is available online for use by government, industry and the public.

A report released Thursday by Miller's committee charged that, due largely to political influence that took place under the Bush administration, the chemical database has been damaged.

According to the report, the listings do not provide basic information about some of the most common chemical-related health threats. Under Bush, the system "was broken, not by accident, but through conscious, sustained effort" by administration officials in the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.

A study this week from the Center for Progressive Reform, a nonprofit that works on health and environmental issues, found the database lacks current information on a majority of hazardous pollutants, even those identified by Congress in 1990 for quick regulatory action.

Separately, the Government Accountability Office released a report earlier in the year that listed White House interference among the factors that have hampered the regulation of toxic chemicals.

John D. Graham, who led the White House regulatory affairs office under Bush, disputed those conclusions this week in an e-mail exchange, saying flawed EPA scientific protocols deserved a good part of the blame for the delays.

The new Obama administration rules are designed to streamline the assessment process, placing EPA in charge but still giving the White House an early, specific opportunity to participate.

"Why would they want to politicize it that way?" asked Francesca Grifo, director of the Scientific Integrity Program of the Union of Concerned Scientists, which had heaped criticism on the Bush administration's use of science and has generally lauded Obama's approach.

White House spokesman Kenneth Baer said the new rules provide long-requested transparency as well as a timetable for getting assessments completed. The rules, he said, simply allow scientists, even those in the White House, to contribute to the discussion.

"The rule refers to White House staff who have scientific credentials," he said. Besides, he said, "their comments will be made public. So, there is a level of transparency that will guard against the type of outcomes the critics are worried about."

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