

New EPA administrator has tough work ahead

PPH
5-22-03

● Whitman's moderation was ineffective in the Bush administration, which has moved to weaken environmental laws.

Though Christie Whitman's letter of resignation as head of the Environmental Protection Agency sparkles with praise for the Bush administration's work on the environment, it's clear that her tenure wasn't filled with sunshine.

Environmentalists and lawmakers characterize Whitman as a moderate who continually ran into the brick wall of an administration that was bent on breaking down environmental policy. Her resignation is effective June 27.

Gregory Wetstone, advocacy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in a statement that Whitman "presided over a White House-driven effort to undermine crucial environmental laws."

He's right. A few examples:

● The EPA wants to weaken the "new source review," which requires new factories and expanding factories to install tougher air pollution controls. Now, the agency wants to let older factories - which are less likely to have more efficient pollution controls - to avoid upgrades when they expand.

This has a direct bearing on Maine, which has the unfortunate notoriety of being America's tailpipe because of pollution carried here from the Midwest on the jet stream. Maine also has the second-highest adult asthma rate in the nation, so the problem becomes even greater.

● The agency has proposed significant reductions in the number of wetlands protected by the Clean Water Act, prompted by an interpretation of a 2001 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that took away some federal authority to regulate wetlands. This could affect 300,000 acres - 5 percent - of the wetlands in Maine.

● Bush's Clear Skies proposal, which Whitman praises in her resignation letter as a means to reduce power plant pollution, would undermine Clean Air Act requirements to reduce mercury pollution and does nothing to reduce global-warming gases such as carbon dioxide.

U.S. Rep. Tom Allen, a Maine Democrat, issued a statement that said Whitman brought "relative moderation" to the Bush administration, yet her disagreements with policy went unheeded. Most recently she

disagreed with the administration's push to exempt the Department of Defense from provisions under some environmental laws, which was being debated this week in both houses.

"Administrator Whitman's inability to advance environmentally sound positions is further evidence that moderates have no place in the administration or within national Republican leadership," Allen said.

Sure, there were some successes,

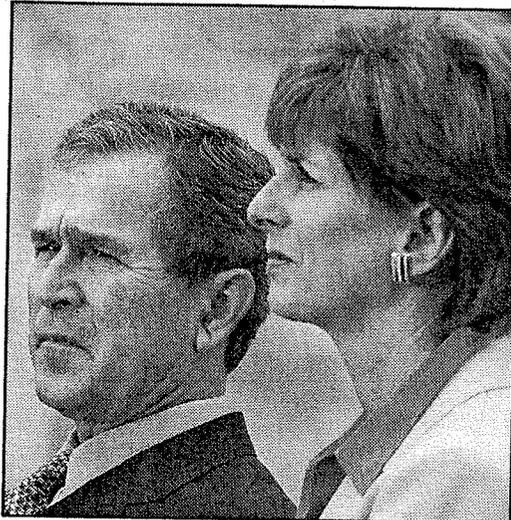
such as policies to establish low-emission school buses and reduce pollution from non-road diesel engines. The damage, however, has been greater.

Allen pointed out that Whitman's resignation is the latest in a series from the agency. Eric Schaeffer, head of the EPA's Office of Regulatory Enforcement, resigned last year and in a public letter to Whitman cited frustrations with the EPA's inability to enforce environmental laws.

Allen said that confirmation of President Bush's next choice for an EPA administrator will be the most important environmental vote the Senate has this year. He's absolutely right.

The next EPA leader must be willing to grapple with a headstrong administration to make progress on environmental policy-making. This person can make or break the agency's effectiveness in protecting the nation's resources and health.

Environmental and public health groups will be watching closely, and the public should be as well.



File photo

Whitman's victories paled in comparison with the Bush administration's assault on environmental policy.