

Environmental

## What Cost <sup>^</sup>Health?

In June of this year, when the House and Senate agreed to balance the federal budget by 2002 and cut billions in spending in fiscal year 1996, the stage was set for skirmishes over pieces of the federal budget, including programs related to environmental health. By late July, the House of Representatives approved appropriations measures that provided dramatically less than the Clinton administration requested for the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the Department of Energy's programs to clean up defense facilities.

On July 28, Vice President Al Gore told reporters that the sharp cuts approved by the House "would not allow us to sustain the level of public health and environmental protection that the American people are accustomed to," adding that drinking water and air would become "dirtier, make more people sick, and kill people."

The comments by Gore illustrated the ideological chasm separating the Clinton administration and the House, which aimed some of its largest cuts at the EPA and OSHA, agencies that have long vexed American business and which some in Congress regard as overreaching and ineffectual. But the debate last summer is not likely to be a one-time occurrence, according to observers, who expect the bruising battles to be a perennial feature of American life as the country gropes toward a balanced budget.

Accompanying the debate about how much to spend on the EPA and OSHA and the scope of their activities is growing congressional interest in how agencies use science to make regulatory decisions. These concerns have helped spawn numerous regulatory reform proposals that would require agencies to issue "decisional criteria" for all major rules that reflect the costs and benefits of the regulation and to conduct peer-reviewed risk assessments based on specifications contained in the legislation. Some proposals would allow existing

regulations to be challenged under the new laws.

John Cohen, director of risk policy for the National Association of Manufacturers and executive director of the Alliance for Reasonable Regulation, said the intent of the proposals was not to roll back protections, but to improve efficiency. "We agree with the ends of environmental laws," he said, but "we can get there more cost effectively."

The desire to reform environmental policy was also behind the House cuts, said John Shanahan, policy analyst for the Heritage Foundation. Shanahan said the size of the cuts may have been designed to force the Clinton administration to work with the Republican majority in Congress on reform of environmental laws. The enforcement programs at the EPA were singled out for especially deep cuts because the agency is regarded as "an abuser of business and individuals and just regular folks who work for a living," and the "main tool that allows [EPA] to be an abuser is enforcement," Shanahan said.

But with some exceptions, most notably the NIOSH, appropriators were somewhat more generous with funding for environmental health research. In the tight-fisted House budget for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), bipartisan support for the National Institutes of Health, including NIEHS, resulted in an increase of 5.7% over fiscal year 1995 levels for NIH as a whole, and 5.9% for NIEHS specifically. Congressional sources said the relatively favorable treatment accorded NIH was due partly to House DHHS Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman John Porter (R-IL), who believes NIH spending is a sound investment which reduces health care costs, improves American competitiveness in pharmaceutical and biomedical industries, and promotes the general well-being of the American people.

The House overall appropriated 33% less than the Clinton administration requested for the EPA, but provided roughly a 10% increase over FY 1995 for the EPA's

research and development account. The Appropriations Committee, in its report on the EPA budget, acknowledged criticism of the EPA's regulatory decisions as "being deficient of a sound science base," but complimented the agency on recent improvements. "With peer-reviewed, meaningful, quality research, the agency will be better prepared to scientifically support its rulemaking," the committee said, and urged the EPA to make "extensive use" of the agency's Office of Research and Development (ORD). The committee also called for the EPA's research office to work more with the EPA Science Advisory Board, and ordered the agency to provide recommendations on using the DOE's national labs for all "appropriate research" by 1 April 1996."

The EPA fared somewhat better in the Senate budget bill which is currently in committee after being returned from the floor of the Senate for revisions. In that bill, the EPA would receive funding of only 23% less than the administration's request. This information did not cheer EPA Administrator Carol Browner who argued in a September 11 statement that a likely compromise between the Senate and House bills would still mean a cut for the EPA. "On Capitol Hill, splitting the difference between the House and the Senate is the name of the budget game, and in this game the American people will be the losers. . . . Americans will lose vital public health and environmental protections."

### EPA Research Improvements

Lek Kadeli, chief of the resources planning and execution staff of the EPA's ORD, said the Appropriations Committee's supportive comments are due to a number of factors, including the EPA's "Science to Achieve Results" or STAR initiative, which provides increased funding for peer-reviewed competitive grants and fellowships and demonstrates "our efforts to have a balanced research program" and "obtain the best science within EPA and outside" the agency. Reorganization of ORD labs, a

commitment to science quality, and the use of peer review for all ORD research (which includes studying pesticide exposure in children and the effect of chemicals on the endocrine glands) are also generating congressional support.

An EPA official who asked not to be identified said criticism of how the EPA uses science may stem from the research done by EPA program offices that is used to support rules under specific regulatory programs, like the Clean Air Act or the Safe Drinking Water Act. To address quality concerns, EPA Administrator Carol Browner has asked program offices to adopt standard operating procedures for peer review of all research. The emphasis on peer review "is one of the cultural changes occurring in the agency," the source said.

Although the House approved increases for the EPA's research and development account, it approved cuts of \$457 million for personnel costs and compliance and monitoring activities. An EPA source said a dramatic cutback in funding for personnel costs could mean some EPA labs might have to be closed. The seeming contradiction in the House's decision to provide increases for EPA research and development but not the staff to do the work was addressed by Alan Moghissi, director of the Institute for Regulatory Science and a former EPA researcher. Moghissi suggested that House appropriators may have intended the EPA to contract out more research, a strategy he thinks might produce minor benefits. But two EPA sources said there is no evidence to support such speculation; one source noted that Congress last year approved additional staff to ensure that work would not have to be contracted out.

While the EPA ponders the meaning of the House's budget numbers, Linda Rosenstock, director of NIOSH believes her agency's budget numbers from the House have a clear meaning: the first step in possible elimination. The House approved a \$99 million budget for FY 1996, which is 25% less than NIOSH received in FY 1995. Cuts of that size would be devastating to NIOSH's intramural and extramural programs, Rosenstock said, and would affect public health, not just workplace safety. "All of our research activities have a connection to the public," she said, citing NIOSH's research on occupationally related cancers and asthma. "Our knowledge about what causes asthma in the workplace is very transferrable to concerns about rising asthma mortality and morbidity that may also be related to environmental exposures."

The public benefits from NIOSH

research because the public is often exposed to the same hazardous substances found in the workplace, as workers carry home to their families hazardous substances like lead, or as substances are emitted from workplaces into the atmosphere. But Rosenstock believes the public health benefits provided by NIOSH go unnoticed by some members of Congress, who believe the institute's activities are duplicated by other agencies. For these reasons, Rosenstock said, last summer's budget numbers may be a first step toward eliminating NIOSH. And eliminating NIOSH, she said, would contradict the desire expressed by some in Congress for improved science. A congressional source agreed with Rosenstock that House appropriators may have been unclear about NIOSH's work, but also said the institute may have been "lumped in with OSHA" and therefore considered deserving of sizable cuts.

The Senate, however, may better recognize the value of these two agencies. In the Senate budget, NIOSH would receive \$137 million, an increase of \$38 million over House appropriations, and OSHA would receive \$296 million, which although an almost \$16 million cut from the FY 95 budget, would still be \$22 million more than the House appropriations.

Congressional budget-cutters also axed funding for DOE programs to assess worker health and safety and the health of communities near DOE facilities. Congress approved a \$5 million recision in an FY 1995 budget of \$18 million for a program to study populations around contaminated DOE facilities. "We're trying to minimize the disruptions to on going studies," such as dose reconstruction studies and the thyroid disease study of communities around Hanford, said Mary Jo Zacchero, assistant to Tara O'Toole, DOE assistant secretary for environment, safety, and health. "It's clear that there will be less [money] than we thought we would have."

### Nonhealth Environmental Research

Congressional appropriators were even less generous with environmental research not directly related to health, according to Peter Backlund, a staff member of the Committee on Environmental and Natural Resources, a subcommittee of the interagency National Science and Technology Council which operates from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. The EPA's Environmental Technology Program, global change research by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the DOE, and the DOE's solar and renewable energy research

programs have been targeted for cuts, Backlund said, which the Clinton administration believes will hinder efforts to improve scientific knowledge about environmental issues. But budget cuts are likely to recur, Backlund said, and agencies will have to constantly assess the efficiency of their programs and eliminate duplication, which are key objectives of the National Science and Technology Council.

The National Association of Manufacturers' Cohen believes improvements in efficiency will help federal agencies, like private businesses, accomplish more in spite of less funding. The private sector has coped with strained resources and learned how to operate more efficiently, Cohen commented, and government will have to do likewise. "We don't accept the premise that the only way government and EPA in particular can do more is by throwing more money at the agency," he said. "Government can do things better and smarter."

Still, the size of the cuts advocated by the House last summer for the EPA and OSHA was "totally without precedent," according to Vice President Gore, and environmental groups, labor unions, and the affected agencies offered dire predictions about the consequences of such cuts. EPA Administrator Browner told reporters last summer that the House's proposed 50% reduction in the Clinton administration's request for enforcement activities would cripple the criminal enforcement program, under which 525 criminal cases were brought in 1994. Browner said funding would be eliminated for local governments to improve drinking water systems, and no new cleanups would occur under the Superfund.

OSHA estimated that reduced funding would cause an additional 50,000 workplace injuries, and Keith Mestrich, an occupational safety and health specialist with the AFL-CIO, predicted more hazardous releases into communities surrounding plants if OSHA's compliance activities are severely curtailed. A strong enforcement program not only identifies companies that don't comply, but also deters businesses from violating OSHA rules, Mestrich said. If businesses know that OSHA will not be able to enforce its rules, companies may have little incentive to comply, he said. The DOE also expressed great alarm at the House's proposal to cut \$800 million from the department's \$6.6 billion request for its environmental management program, contending that cuts of that size would affect cleanups of 50 DOE facilities in 20 states and would hinder the department's ability to

address urgent threats like leaking and potentially explosive underground radioactive waste tanks.

Sharon Buccino, staff attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Karen Florini, staff attorney with the Environmental Defense Fund, believe the size of the House's proposed cuts, coupled with regulatory reform, are part of an effort to radically alter environmental policy. The budget resolution approved by the House and Senate, Buccino noted, contemplated a 13%, across-the-board cut in government programs, yet the reductions proposed by the House for the EPA and OSHA were more than double the 13% target. For this reason, the House EPA budget and its numerous riders that would prevent the EPA from implementing certain laws reflect a desire to reduce environmental protection, not simply a desire to reduce the federal budget, she said.

Florini said the budget cuts would be especially harmful if coupled with regulatory reform because the agencies would be saddled with increased workloads just as

resources are shrinking. Some of the regulatory reform proposals, she said, would require agencies to conduct detailed cost-benefit analyses of proposed regulations and of alternative approaches to determine whether an alternative might be more cost effective, leaving "the agency swamped with more paperwork and unable to spend time enforcing new rules," she said. "It doesn't matter if society would be better off if the agency addressed other problems; industry would get first call on dwindling taxpayer resources." The impact on agency resources would hinder efforts to address increased asthma morbidity and mortality and the emerging issue of environmental endocrine disrupters, Florini said. "It's unquestionably the case that we can have smarter more streamlined regulation," but, she said, the proposals are like "remodeling the kitchen by blowing it up with a bomb."

#### Anemic Budgets

Walter Rosenbaum, a political science professor at the University of Florida at

Gainesville and a former policy analyst at the EPA, doubts that the EPA could endure cutbacks of 10–30% without major consequences, in part because EPA budgets were trimmed back during the Reagan–Bush era. "What you're doing really is bleeding a patient that already has a bad case of anemia," he said, adding that the biggest health impacts could stem from the agency's response, or lack of response, to toxic air emissions and water pollution. The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 imposed stricter standards on toxic air emissions, which the EPA has been struggling to implement, Rosenbaum said, but the program was targeted by House budget cutters. Similarly, budget support has been weak for EPA efforts to address water pollution from nonpoint, or diffuse sources, such as groundwater contamination from pesticides used on farm fields. "That's where the health impacts could be great, but it would be years or decades before it would become known."

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## Toxicological Evaluation of Chemical Interactions

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Supplements

Under the sponsorship of the International Society for the Study of Xenobiotics (ISSX), a satellite meeting of the IV European ISSX meeting, "Toxicological Evaluation of Chemical Interactions: Relevance of Social, Environmental, and Occupational Factors," was held in Bologna, Italy, July 3–6, 1992. The primary aim of the meeting was to identify those combined exposures for which synergistic, antagonistic, or potentiating effects may still be significant at real exposure levels, considerably affecting the risk for humans. Contributions covering all aspects of toxicological evaluations — including analytical and biological procedures to detect exposure, toxicokinetics, xenobiotic metabolism, toxic effects, and risk assessment — were presented as invited lectures, oral communications, and posters.

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