

NEW HEAD OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

October 29, 2003

The governor of Utah is about to take charge of the Environmental Protection Agency, the organization at the center of heated debates about land, air and water policies throughout the country.

Despite long delays caused by Democrats who have repeatedly criticized the administration's environmental record, the Senate approved Gov. Mike Leavitt on Tuesday.

When President Bush nominated Leavitt in August, he said the governor "has been a leader in applying high standards in air quality, and he understands the importance of clear standards in every environmental policy."

"He respects the ability of state and local governments to meet those standards, rejects the old ways of command and control from above," the president said.

Though the 100-member Senate voted 88-8 for Leavitt's confirmation, some senators still doubted his qualifications.

"Do we really want to return to the days when rivers caught fire and people literally keeled over from air pollution?" asked Sen. Frank Lautenberg, (D-N.J.), one of the senators who voted against Leavitt.

Who is Michael Leavitt?

Mike Leavitt, 52, has served 11 years as the governor of Utah. When he resigns on Nov. 5 to take the EPA position, Lt. Gov. Olene Walker will become Utah's first female governor.

Leavitt, a former insurance executive has been popular in the Republican state, maintaining 75 percent approval ratings. However, he has received mixed reviews for his environmental record in Utah.

Environmental groups claim that Leavitt weakened environmental regulatory agencies, allowed businesses to create their own voluntary agreements instead of mandatory requirements, fought for roads to be built in protected wetlands and overlooked scientific evidence.

Leavitt defended his record to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, citing the cleanup of water contaminated at the Kennecott Copper Mine, the largest mine-related water reclamation project in U.S. history. He also talked about organizing a partnership of states, American Indian tribes, environmentalists and industry representatives to reduce the air pollution over the Grand Canyon.

Leavitt says his environmental philosophy is based on the Latin word *enlibra*. "It means 'to move toward balance,'" he explained. "To me, there is an inherent human responsibility to care for the earth. But there's also an economic imperative that we're dealing with in a global economy to do it less expensively."

Democratic Opposition

Tuesday's vote was delayed by Democratic members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee who boycotted an Oct. 1 meeting to confirm Leavitt. While some of the Democrats opposed Leavitt, a majority used the confirmation process to highlight the environmental issues they felt the Bush administration has been avoiding.

"The Bush administration is weakening the Clean Air Act, it is weakening the Clean Water Act and it is not cleaning up Superfund sites. We have a right to know why. There are life and death issues," independent Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont said when he showed up at the Oct. 1 committee meeting just long enough to voice his complaints.

Sen. Hilary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) used the hearings to criticize the EPA for not warning about potentially hazardous conditions at the World Trade Center site following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Minutes before the vote on Tuesday, Clinton said she would vote for Leavitt's confirmation after receiving a letter from the president's council saying it would offer additional measures to protect New York City residents.

"I'm pleased we've made this progress with the White House ... and I hope their cooperation is an indication of a new attitude," Clinton said.

About the EPA

The EPA has been the center of controversy since its inception in 1970. Growing public concern for the environment led President Nixon and Congress to create an agency to repair some of the environmental damage that had been plaguing the nation for years.

Though the EPA is not an official Cabinet-level department, the administrator who is nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, holds the same status as the secretaries of departments such as transportation and labor.

The administrator has been invited by President Bush to sit in on all the Cabinet meetings. Congress is pushing for full Cabinet status for the EPA, which would create a Department of Environmental Protection and an EPA secretary.

Leavitt replaces Christine Todd Whitman who retired in May.

What's Up Next?

A top priority for the new administrator will be the "Clear Skies" proposal, which allows companies who emit pollution to buy clean air credits from other companies. Another is "New Source Review" which allows many of the nations' coal-burning power plants to modernize without adding expensive new pollution controls. The policy modifies the federal Clean Air Act of 1977 that made anti-pollution devices mandatory any time a plant upgraded.

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