

Arsenic and old waste: US Congress debates Bush environmental policy

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A simple act: turning on the faucet, filling up the glass and taking a long, sweet drink on a hot day in the August heat. But that mundane glass of water is filled, like every commodity, with social contradictions, and ... possibly more than a little arsenic.

In this case, the social contradictions are particularly tense. It is beginning to be said that George Bush's call to "let them drink arsenic" might be to his administration what "ketchup as a vegetable" was to Ronald Reagan—emblematic of his arrogant disdain for the American people, endless corruption and subservience to the most rapacious big business interests.

For this reason, some congressmen have begun to pull back from the Republican credo which could be described as "deregulate everything" and "as soon as possible." However, they have chosen to distance themselves from Bush only on selected environmental issues, that is those concerns whose appeal is tailored to their voting constituency.

On Friday, July 27, the House of Representatives voted to restore the lower levels of permissible arsenic in drinking water that had been established by the outgoing Clinton administration. Nineteen House Republicans rebuffed the president and refused to put the January 1, 2001 standards on hold. This was the third House vote lost by the administration on environmental issues.

Last March, the Bush administration had announced it would suspend the arsenic rules which tightened the American maximum permissible level of arsenic in drinking water standards, reducing it from 50 parts per billion (ppb) down to 10 ppb. The president said the 10 ppb ceiling, which is upheld by both the World Health Organization and the European Union, was too high, claiming "scientific indicators are unclear."

EPA Administrator Christie Whitman bluntly stated that the issue required more research to see if it was "worth spending an estimated \$200 million" (her figure) to clean

up, saying Bush wanted an approach based on "sound science," as though fears of arsenic were a form of superstition.

The toxicity of arsenic, however, is beyond doubt. It has been regulated for over 60 years, and scientific studies have provided increasing evidence as to its deadly consequences, even in very low levels. According to the National Academy of Sciences, long-term exposure to low concentrations of arsenic in drinking water can lead to skin, bladder, lung and prostate cancer. Non-cancer effects of ingesting low levels of arsenic include cardiovascular disease, diabetes and anemia, as well as reproductive and developmental, immunological and neurological problems.

Arsenic is normally secreted by the kidneys, but over a prolonged period of ingestion, the body cannot remove the poison fast enough, resulting in increased levels in the system. It is generally thought to take from 8 to 14 years of low-level exposure for the physical symptoms of arsenic poisoning to emerge.

Prior to the Clinton rule changes, the US was alone in the industrialized world in allowing up to 50 ppb of arsenic in the drinking water. This was the standard established in 1942 (prior to the knowledge that arsenic was a carcinogen) and adopted by the EPA in 1975 as an "interim" measure which had to be reviewed and "promptly" revised. The Public Health Service first recommended the arsenic standard be lowered to 10 ppb in 1962, but it was not until January 2001—after decades of regulatory development, repeated missed deadlines and millions of dollars in EPA research—that the agency finally issued the 10 ppb standard.

The National Academy of Sciences completed an exhaustive research study and issued its report in 1999. It concluded that the old standard was more than 100 times less protective than other drinking water standards. It also stated that drinking water at the 50 ppb standard "could

easily” result in 1 in 100 persons getting cancer. This is a cancer risk 10,000 times higher than the EPA allows for contaminants in food and 100 times higher than the EPA has ever allowed for tap water contaminants.

It is estimated that 12.7 million Americans presently drink tap water with over 10 ppb of arsenic each day.

Arsenic is found in two types, organic and inorganic. Inorganic arsenic is the type most deadly to humans, and it is found in groundwater as a result of minerals dissolving naturally over time. However, high levels of arsenic can also be the result of toxic waste created by mining industries, pesticides, metal products, medicines, and pigments and dyes. Both the Sierra Club and Chuck Fox, the former water administrator at the EPA, have pointed to the role of the mining industry as critical both for the levels of arsenic pollution it creates and in blocking the tightening of US standards over many decades.

To date, the largest occurrence of arsenic poisoning has been in Bangladesh, beginning in the 1980s when it was revealed that millions were forced to drink contaminated water due to the use of tube wells. While the causes of this social disaster arose specifically out of the lack of development and infrastructure within the impoverished country, it is notable that the government of Bangladesh also rejected the World Health Organization arsenic standard of 10 ppb and considered 50 ppb acceptable.

“‘How delicious’ one of our gentlemen found the time to say,” quips one of the elderly sisters in the classic 1952 dark comedy *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Veteran of a couple of dozen “mercy” killings, the lady is describing the efficacy of her elderberry wine concoction which delivered its arsenic to “her gentlemen” with remarkable speed, coupled with a dash of strychnine and cyanide for good measure.

One cannot help but recall this scene when considering the American government’s debate on arsenic. That Congress has taken so long to tighten the standards, much less consider loosening limits on this deadly and notorious poison, is an indictment in itself. It gives a chilling glimpse of the ever-deepening divide between the needs and safety of the American population and the profit obsession of its bloated and swaggering ruling class.

In other battlefields of the Bush administration’s ongoing war against the environment and public health:

* The chemical, beef and poultry industries are conducting a fierce campaign to delay an EPA study which showed that consumption of animal fat and dairy products containing traces of dioxin causes cancer in

humans. The report is the result of over 10 years of study. The document concludes that people who consume even small amounts of dioxin face a cancer risk of 1 in 100. It also links the chemical to attention disorders, learning disabilities and susceptibility to infections and liver disorders. The Center for Responsive Politics points out that the chemical, livestock and meatpacking industries contributed \$1,171,000 to the Bush campaign and are at the forefront of the drive to stall the publication of the study.

* The administration is seeking a lengthy delay in adopting a new rule for cleaning up thousands of the country’s polluted lakes, rivers and streams. The rule was challenged in court by utilities, manufacturers and farm groups which said it would force them to spend tens of billions of dollars. The proposed cleanup would cover about 21,000 bodies of water, from lakes and ponds to rivers, that were determined to be too polluted for fishing and swimming because of storm water and agricultural runoff. Agricultural and timber groups have rejected the mandate and called for “voluntary programs.”

* The House of Representatives has endorsed the administration’s plan to cut the 270 enforcement positions within the EPA, 8 percent of the total, and shift resources to the states, under conditions where many states no longer address serious violations of the Clean Air Act and other federal pollution laws as they are required to do.

* Bush has renounced a campaign promise to restrict carbon dioxide emissions. The administration wants Congress to overhaul the Clean Air Act. Details of the plan, designed to be “less intrusive,” are expected in September. Whitman, however, has already said that the EPA would like to eliminate the regulation that utilities be required to install pollution controls when they build a new power plant or significantly expand an existing one, known as the “new source rule.” The EPA chief is also exempting carbon dioxide emissions from the proposed caps on major pollutants. Coal-using utilities were among the most generous donors to both Democrats and Republicans in the presidential election and they are very active in the current discussion.



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