

Ruckelshaus Promises EPA Cleanup

He has pledged to enforce the law, but his appointment as EPA administrator may not signal a change in environmental policy

William D. Ruckelshaus, President Reagan's choice for administrator at the Environmental Protection Agency, has made it clear he intends to bring a new management style to the beleaguered agency, but it is less obvious whether he will significantly change the current environmental policies of the White House.

During confirmation hearings before a Senate committee, Ruckelshaus, 50, disagreed with the Administration in only a couple of policy areas while refusing to commit himself in a host of others. But the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee on 6 May voted unanimously to recommend Ruckelshaus for the job and full Senate confirmation, expected this week, is a foregone conclusion.

Ruckelshaus, who was EPA's first administrator during the early 1970s, has the formidable task of repairing the damage wrought during the tenure of Anne McGill Burford. At the hearings, he acknowledged the problems that developed under Burford, who resigned 2 months ago in the heat of investigations by six congressional committees. The inquiries revealed, among other things, that top EPA officials sought special favors from industry and also tried to oust other officials whom they found politically unacceptable.

Ruckelshaus said, "There has been an abuse of process. EPA is crippled and troubled." He pledged, "There will be no hit lists, there will be no big 'P' political decisions, there will be no sweetheart deals. . . . I intend that EPA will operate forthrightly and honestly."

Democrats and Republicans alike asked him repeatedly whether he believed he had adequate authority from the Administration to carry out environmental law. Ruckelshaus, a poised and articulate witness, stressed each time that after discussions with Reagan, "I believe I have all the independence I need." An EPA administrator, he said, has "two masters—the American people and the Administration." Citizens take priority, he said. "There are some lines you just don't overstep." He promised to begin immediately to boost agency morale and refortify the staff with individuals chosen for their "competence, experience, and honesty."

Although most committee members

seemed to find Ruckelshaus a superlative choice, officials from environmental groups gave him only lukewarm support earlier in the week. Although in testimony before the committee none doubted his integrity, only the National Wildlife Federation endorsed Ruckelshaus. Representatives of the Natural Resources Defense Council and the National Audubon Society questioned where he truly stands on specific issues, particularly because Ruckelshaus comes to the EPA from the Weyerhaeuser Company, where he was senior vice president for legal affairs. During that time, he sup-



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ported a House bill that, according to environmentalists, would have greatly weakened the Clean Air Act. In a letter to Vice President Bush in January 1981 he stated, "Attempting to cope with air pollution by using health or environmental effects as the sole determinant of national policy is inherently irrational."

Ruckelshaus remained steadfast on this point during the hearings. He emphasized that cost be weighed against benefit, which is also an Administration policy. He said that a single measure, such as public health, "needs to be balanced with other social concerns" such as energy production and economics.

Ruckelshaus was especially vague when asked by Senator George Mitchell (D-Maine) whether he would try to increase EPA's budget. Mitchell cited a 1980 magazine article in which Ruckelshaus said that the agency had "more tasks than people or money to do

them.' " Ruckelshaus did not challenge the accuracy of the quote but would only say that he would review the budget.

He was also noncommittal on issues concerning acid rain and a legislative extension of Superfund, although he says both topics are on his long list of priorities. Ruckelshaus said he has already spoken to Secretary of State George Shultz about acid rain, but did not indicate if he favored a shift in policy in the dispute with Canada, whose lakes and streams near the U.S. border are becoming increasingly contaminated.

Similarly, he was equivocal about the usefulness of Superfund as an administrative way to handle the cleanup of hazardous waste. The \$1.6-billion program is due for reauthorization during this Congress. "It is a good tool," he said, but whether it should be extended, "I don't know."

He did, however, state that cleanup of toxic waste sites should proceed before the federal government determines who should pay the cost. "There has been too much emphasis on who pays," he remarked. His position, though, is at odds with the Administration. He added that if his approach were adopted, more money would most likely be needed to support the program.

Ruckelshaus differed with Reagan policies in one other area that could mean a significant change in environmental policy, if he is persuasive. He opposed the idea that a threshold can be set for exposure to carcinogens and said that even small amounts should not be allowed into the air or water. The agency, he said, should take a very conservative position and err on the side of caution. He will likely face a tough fight from the White House given its determination to ease regulations for industry.

Perhaps Richard E. Ayres, senior staff attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, aptly described Ruckelshaus in testimony before the committee. "Mr. Ruckelshaus' standing as an environmental statesman remains something of an enigma . . ." he said. Congress, however, is unlikely to condone an enigma for very long. The actions of the EPA administrator, more than ever before, will be closely watched by members of Congress and their constituents.

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