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Hazy view. EPA is under the gun to limit levels of fine smoke particles, despite gaps in understanding about their health effects.

Dustup Over EPA's Particulate Standard

A debate over the health risks posed by tiny soot and smoke particles is about to grow several notches louder as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—prodded by a court order—prepares to issue proposed limits on their discharge.

The rule will apply to very small particulates that, when inhaled, are believed to contribute to heart disease and respiratory illnesses. EPA already regulates particulate matter around 10 microns or less in diameter (PM₁₀). But a six-city study by Harvard researchers in the early 1990s found a higher death rate in dirtier cities and suggested a link between smaller particles—PM_{2.5}—and up to 60,000 premature deaths each year. EPA had fallen behind on a mandate to revise clean air rules every 5 years, and a lawsuit by the American Lung Association citing the study is now forcing the agency to issue a PM_{2.5} rule by 29 November. The new rule could require industry to spend billions of dollars for equipment to reduce PM_{2.5} from sources such as refineries and diesel vehicles.

Some scientists, however, are worried about regulating PM_{2.5} when much remains unclear about its health effects. For example, researchers don't understand the mechanism in the lungs by which PM_{2.5} causes disease, or whether even tinier particles pose a greater risk. Last summer, an EPA clean air advisory panel couldn't agree on an appropriate PM_{2.5} standard and urged that EPA fund more research in this area. "It would have been nice if we could have

bought ourselves a few more years," says panel member Philip Hopke, an atmospheric chemist at Clarkson University in upstate New York.

The proposed PM_{2.5} rule, along with a new proposed ozone standard, will appear in the *Federal Register*. EPA officials are hoping that the expected storm of comments will help clear the air on this controversial topic.

Activists Target Breast Cancer Bureaucracy...

In a reversal of normal lobbying, breast cancer activists are trying to steer money away from a special office at the National Cancer Institute created to promote their cause. Instead, they want most of the funds spent on basic research. This puts them at odds with public health officials who think that the office—the National Action Plan on Breast Cancer (NAPBC)—should expand. This disagreement is to be aired at a 7 November meeting of the NAPBC steering committee.

The Clinton administration created the NAPBC in 1994 in response to activists' demands for a direct role in planning government projects, including cancer prevention, education, and basic research. The goal was to have citizens and officials work to-

gether to defeat breast cancer. In 1995, the office received \$10 million; in 1996, \$14.8 million. Congress earmarked \$14.8 million again for 1997.

But now, a champion of the action plan, Fran Visco, president of the National Breast Cancer Coalition, says she fears the office has grown too interested in bureaucratic projects. As reported in the *Cancer Letter*, Visco has written twice to the Senate stating that "too much money" is being put into action-plan coordinating efforts. In a phone interview, Visco said that only about \$4 million is needed to continue NAPBC's coordinating work, and that the rest should be turned over to the National Cancer Institute for peer-reviewed science.

The chief U.S. official involved in the action plan, Susan Blumenthal, director of the Office of Women's Health at the Department of Health and Human Services, says she is "perplexed" by Visco's position. Blumenthal, who told Congress that the plan needs \$14.8 million, says, "there's still a lot of work to do, if we're going to mount an all-out attack on breast cancer." She adds that research is "just one" of many things that need to be "catalyzed" by the action plan. She and Visco, who co-chair NAPBC's steering committee, will present their clashing views at its meeting next week.

...While Research Gets Rose Garden Boost

Basic science isn't something you'd expect to see in the spotlight during a presidential campaign. But President Clinton made it part of his pitch to women voters earlier this week, declaring that \$30 million in breast cancer research funds will go to genetics studies.

Clinton, surrounded by federal research chiefs and breast cancer activists, made the announcement at a 27 October photo-op in the Rose Garden. The White House is directing that \$20 million out of \$112 million Congress earmarked in the 1997 Defense Department budget for breast cancer research go for genetic studies, along with \$10 million from the National Institutes of Health's budget. According to NIH, this will raise the amount it spends on breast cancer genetics from \$40 million to \$50 million, while total spending by the two agencies on breast cancer in 1997 will rise to \$542 million. Says Fran Visco, head of the National Breast Cancer Coalition: "There's a recognition that the science is now there ... and we want to make certain that the programs at NIH and [Defense] focus on [genetics]."

Clinton also unveiled a new NIH Web site on breast cancer (<http://www.napbc.org>).

Campaigns Seek Scientists' Votes

"Hi. This is Scientists & Engineers for Clinton/Gore. Can we count on your support?"

That recent call, to a federal science official who requested anonymity, would have been a waste of time a few years ago under rules that barred political activity by civil servants. But a revision 2 years ago of the Hatch Act, which governs this area, allows federal employees for the first time to participate in a full range of political activity outside of work. And in the waning days of the presidential race, that includes campaign calls to scientists.

"We want to build a constituency of scientists and we want to get out the vote," says Kathleen Ream, coordinator of the Clinton effort. "We'd also like federal workers to know it's all right to engage in political activity." This week the Clinton/Gore ticket

unveiled the names of several hundred prominent scientists and engineers, from all sectors, who support the president. The Dole/Kemp campaign has compiled a similar but shorter list of supporters, according to campaign aide Bonner Cohen.

"The public doesn't pay much attention to these lists," confesses William Nierenberg, director emeritus of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, who helped to solicit names for the Dole camp. "But they are very useful during the transition as a new administration seeks the names of potential appointees."

As for whether it's ok to talk to a campaign worker on the job, a staffer at the government's Office of Special Counsel explains that it would be best to continue such conversations at home. And it's still taboo to use one's position to influence an election.