

EPA PROHIBITING EMPLOYEES FROM DISCUSSING POLITICAL ISSUES WITH MEDIA

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EPA is instructing its employees not to discuss political issues with reporters, citing fears that such interactions could inappropriately characterize Bush administration policies just weeks before the November elections, according to internal agency documents and EPA sources.

Agency sources cite several instances in recent weeks in which they have been told by agency managers that the appropriate response to political inquiries is “no comment.” Moreover, an email sent by EPA Region VIII officials to staff in that region articulates its policy of not talking to the press, noting that the upcoming election will likely increase media attention.

Other EPA sources say they have been reminded that all reporters’ phone calls must be referred to media officials to ensure a consistent agency response to inquiries. “I’ve been dressed down numerous times for talking to the press,” one EPA headquarters source says.

These indications may highlight a heightened sensitivity throughout the agency given the highly charged nature of the presidential campaign, in which the president’s detractors view the administration’s environmental policies as a major vulnerability.

EPA Region VIII officials sent an email Aug. 31 to all staff instructing them how to handle press calls. “Rather than give you separate guidance each time [political inquiries] arise, and since it is 2 months before election day there are likely to be plenty more, here is how to handle inquiries for information that seem partisan: The response is ‘no comment,’” according to the email. The email is available on InsideEPA.com.

An EPA source says the email arose after several Region VIII officials received phone calls regarding the environmental records of two candidates for an open U.S. Senate seat in Colorado that will be left vacant by retiring Republican Ben Nighthorse Campbell. The candidates -- Democrat Ken Salazar and Republican Peter Coors -- both are controversial figures in a key race that some observers say could determine which party controls the Senate.

Allegations have been exchanged by both sides in the Colorado Senate race over the reputations of the candidates in protecting the environment. Salazar is the former head of Colorado’s environment department and the current state attorney general. Coors is on leave as the chief executive officer of Coors Brewing Co., which in the past has been fined by the state for alleged water discharge violations.

The Region VIII email also instructs staff not to discuss issues related to the “Lowry landfill,” a Superfund site with groundwater contamination from trichloroethylene (TCE),

an industrial cleaner used in the automotive and metals industries. An EPA source says the issue is politically charged because Colorado health officials are under fire for promulgating controversial TCE regulations that critics say are insufficiently protective.

In addition, Region VIII officials have issued “verbal warnings” to staff not to discuss coalbed methane mining, one agency source says, because of the politics behind the Department of Energy’s desire to develop this kind of mining in the energy-rich Powder River Basin. Some EPA sources have expressed concern over the environmental impacts of the practice.

Coalbed methane mining involves injecting water into coal seams underground to force methane gas to the surface. The method has been controversial because of untreated discharges of high-salinity “produced” waters released when the gas is extracted, which could pollute groundwater and drinking water, an EPA source says.

Sources in other EPA regions say they have not received instructions as specific as those in the Region VIII email, but have been generally warned about the current political nature of environmental policies. “We’re always told to be careful what we say before the election,” according to a Region II source.

This source, and others in EPA headquarters, say they have had to attend “ethics meetings” in the past few months to discuss a host of issues regarding appropriate conduct -- including how to handle political press inquiries.

An EPA spokeswoman says she is not aware of any specific meetings or emails relating to the November election, but thinks both “are a good reminder of Hatch Act issues.” The Hatch Act, passed in 1939, prohibits government employees from taking actions to influence elections. -- Natalie Baughman

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