

washingtonpost.com

EPA Pressed to Call Air Safe After 9/11, Report Says

By John Heilprin
Associated Press
Saturday, August 23, 2003; Page A04

The Environmental Protection Agency's internal watchdog says White House officials pressured the agency to prematurely assure the public that the air was safe to breathe a week after the World Trade Center collapse.

The agency's initial statements in the days following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks were not supported by proper air quality monitoring data and analysis, EPA Inspector General Nikki L. Tinsley said in a 155-page report released late Thursday.

An e-mail sent one day after the attacks, from then-EPA Deputy Administrator Linda Fisher's chief of staff to senior EPA officials, said "all statements to the media should be cleared" first by the National Security Council, the report said.

Approval from the NSC, which is chaired by President Bush and serves as his main forum for discussing national security and foreign policy matters with his senior aides and Cabinet, was arranged through an official with the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the report said.

That council, which coordinates federal environmental efforts, in turn "convinced EPA to add reassuring statements and delete cautionary ones," the inspector general found.

For example, the report found, EPA was persuaded to omit from its early public statements guidance for cleaning indoor spaces and tips on potential health effects from airborne dust containing asbestos, lead, glass fibers and concrete.

James L. Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said in an interview yesterday that EPA did "an incredible job" with the World Trade Center cleanup.

"The White House was involved in making sure that we were getting the most accurate information that was real, on a wide range of activities. That included the NSC -- this was major terrorist incident," he said.

The White House directed EPA to add and delete information, Connaughton said, based on whether it should be released through news releases, information on the Web or other means.

"In the back and forth during that very intense period of time, we were making decisions about where the information should be released, what the best way to communicate the information was, so that people could respond responsibly and so that people had a good relative sense of potential risk," he said.

The EPA inspector general recommended that the agency adopt new procedures so its public statements on health risks and environmental quality are supported by data and analysis. Other recommendations include developing better indoor air cleanups and ways of handling asbestos in large-scale disasters.

© 2003 The Washington Post Company