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EPA's up-Hil battle

Senator vows to fight W's pick for next chief

By MICHAEL SAUL and PAUL H.B. SHIN
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

Sen. Hillary Clinton vowed yesterday to block the appointment of President Bush's new environmental chief until the White House explains why it watered down a report about hazardous air quality at Ground Zero.

Clinton (D-N.Y.) and other Senate Democrats have urged Bush to ferret out those in the White House responsible for pressuring the Environmental Protection Agency to change the wording in its report on air quality in lower Manhattan following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attack.



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Hillary Clinton

The demand for an explanation came after EPA Inspector General Nikki Tinsley concluded in a damning report last month that the White House "convinced the EPA to add reassuring statements and delete cautionary ones."

"This administration has to be held accountable," Clinton said after announcing her intent to block the appointment of Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt as the next EPA administrator.

Matter of trust

Clinton promised to thwart Leavitt's confirmation until the White House answers "the questions New Yorkers have."

"This is a really serious issue that has long-lasting consequences, not only for New Yorkers but for the quality of our environment and the trust in our government," Clinton said during a Labor Day Parade in Manhattan.

Clinton, who is a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works

Committee, said she has nothing against Leavitt but noted she will block the confirmation "as long as it takes until I get those answers."

"I can see no other way to get the administration's attention," she said.

Former EPA chief Christie Whitman said on Aug. 30 that the White House never told her to lie about air quality near Ground Zero, but conceded she did not object when words of caution were pulled from public statements.

Whitman, who resigned from the EPA in May, said she agreed to hold back information that her agency's scientists included in draft news releases.

Whitman insisted that asbestos levels that increased after the attack returned to safe levels quickly and that the available data were subjective.

Whitman also said that rescue workers - many of whom have become ill - were advised to wear protective masks and respirators but chose not to because the apparatus got in the way.

About 40% of the 6,300 workers and volunteers screened by Mount Sinai Medical Center as of June suffered from respiratory problems.

Clinton's request for a congressional hearing on alleged White House influence was rejected Friday by James Inhofe (R-Okla.), chairman of the environment committee. Putting a hold on Leavitt's confirmation will not prevent the Senate environmental committee from debating or even voting on his nomination, but it will block the full Senate from approving his appointment, congressional staffers said.

Confirmation hearings may begin as early as next month.

Bush tapped Leavitt, 52, a three-term Republican governor, on Aug. 11 to succeed Whitman.

Clinton, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and other officials have called for a fresh cleaning of lower Manhattan buildings, saying Tinsley's report shows they were not properly cleaned of toxic dust from the World Trade Center debris plume.

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