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Details Emerge on Post-9/11 Clash Between White House and E.P.A.

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 9 — Tensions between the Environmental Protection Agency and the White House Council on Environmental Quality over informing the public about air safety after the collapse of the World Trade Center may well have been greater than revealed in a report issued by the E.P.A.'s inspector general in August, according to newly released documents.

The August report, evaluating the agency's response, found that White House Advertisement council officials had influenced the language used in news releases to make them less alarming and more reassuring to the public in the first few days after the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001. It said that because of White House influence, some important cautionary information had been removed from proposed agency news releases after they had been reviewed by the council.

The documents that formed the basis for the report — summaries of interviews with agency officials, internal agency documents and e-mail correspondence between White House and agency officials shortly after Sept. 11 — show that there were "screaming telephone calls" about the news releases between Tina Kreisher, then an associate administrator, and Sam Thernstrom, then the White House council's communications director. The E.P.A.'s chief of staff, Eileen McGinnis, had to ask the head of the White House council, James L. Connaughton, to urge his staff to "lighten up," according to interviews with the inspector general's office. Ms. Kreisher, who now works as a speechwriter at the Department of the Interior, is quoted as saying she "felt extreme pressure" from Mr. Thernstrom.

Officials with the council sought to play down the significance of the references to screaming matches. "I think everyone can understand it was an intense and emotional time," Mr. Connaughton said. "It is natural at times that people exchange words. It is also the case that it was a rarity in our collective discussion."

Ms. Kreisher declined to comment.


The documents were released at the request of Congressional Democrats, who have seized on the August report as a political weapon, much to the frustration of administration officials. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York has threatened to block the confirmation of Gov. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah as E.P.A. administrator unless the White House answers questions about what was in the report.

The documents offer details that the Democrats have been clamoring after — essentially who was responsible for editing and influencing the news releases that the environmental agency issued.

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According to the documents, Mr. Thernstrom objected to the agency's putting raw data on a public Web site, fearing that the information would be taken out of context and "easily misunderstood and mischaracterized by political candidates in the city who have an ax to grind," as he wrote in an e-mail message sent to Ms. Kreisher on Sept. 25.

E.P.A. officials said Mr. Thernstrom's message did not influence policy. "As soon as we got the data, we made it available," said Lisa Harrison, a spokeswoman for the agency.

In an interview with the inspector general, Ms. Kreisher also said that Mr. Thernstrom had said the environmental agency should not include health information in news releases because that was New York City's responsibility. But city health officials told the inspector general that they "were not aware of any agreement or understanding concerning this philosophy," according to the documents.

On Thursday, officials of the White House council disputed the city officials' claim.

E.P.A. officials have maintained, both in the documents and in public interviews, that the White House's role after Sept. 11 was to coordinate information and not to suppress it. And they have noted that such joint efforts are typical in major emergencies.

The officials have also noted that the disputed news releases were a fraction of the agency's public information campaign.

A number of senators who have historically had poor relations with the Bush administration over environmental issues piled on their criticism on Thursday. "The release of this information further reinforces the concerns I have raised and puts a fine point on New Yorkers' demand for answers and actions from both the E.P.A. and the White House," Senator Clinton said.

James M. Jeffords of Vermont, the ranking minority member of the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee, said, "This is just part of a pattern of White House interference that prohibits agencies such as the E.P.A. from doing their jobs."

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