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Clinton to Block E.P.A. Nominee to Pressure Bush on Air Quality

By WINNIE HU

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton said yesterday that she would block the nomination of Gov. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah as the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency until President Bush responded to her concerns about air quality around the World Trade Center.

Senator Clinton, who was marching in the Labor Day Parade in Manhattan, said that while she did not have a personal problem with Governor Leavitt, the president's nominee, she wanted to "send a clear message" to the Bush administration that she would not be ignored.

"This is a really serious issue that has long-lasting consequences not only for New York, but also for the quality of our environment and the trust in our government," she said. "I can see no other way to get the administration's attention."

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Last month, President Bush nominated Mr. Leavitt, 52, a three-term Republican governor, to succeed Christie Whitman, who resigned in May.

Natalie Gochnour, a spokeswoman for the governor, said that "out of respect for the senators, Governor Leavitt is reserving all comment until the confirmation hearing."

Senator Clinton, a Democrat, is a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which is expected to hold confirmation hearings on Governor Leavitt in coming weeks. Senator Clinton's aides said that by placing a hold on a nomination, she could prevent the Senate from taking action.

"It's unfortunate that Senator Clinton would seek to politicize such a qualified nominee as Governor Leavitt," said Taylor Gross, a White House spokesman. "He's well regarded throughout the nation as a known consensus builder, bringing people to work together on solutions for environmental improvement."

Last month, the inspector general of the environmental agency released a report saying that after the World Trade Center attack, White House officials instructed the agency to reassure New Yorkers that the air was safe to breathe, even though deadly contaminants were present. E.P.A. officials have defended their actions.

But Senator Clinton and Senator Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut sent a letter late last month to President Bush, asking for a "thorough and expeditious accounting of what transpired" among White House officials by Sept. 5. And Senator Clinton and Representative Jerrold L. Nadler called for a Congressional inquiry into the environmental

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agency's response.

Senator Clinton said yesterday that she had not yet received a response from the White House, and that her request for a hearing was denied by the chairman of the Senate environment committee.

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