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Clinton, troubled by 9-11 report, to block Bush EPA nominee

By ERIN McCLAM

September 6, 2003, 7:27 PM EDT

o0160 nyc-- r n BC-NY--Clinton-EPANomine 3rdLd- Writethru 09-06 0616 BC-NY--Clinton-EPA Nominee, 3rd Ld-Writethru,600 Clinton, troubled by 9-11 report, to block Bush EPA nominee Eds: SUBs 5th graf with 2 new graf with comment from White House; picks up 6th graf pvs. "The report..." By ERIN McCLAMP> Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK (AP) _ Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton said Saturday she planned to block President Bush's nominee to head the Environmental Protection Agency because of a report suggesting the EPA misled New Yorkers about post-Sept. 11 health risks.

Clinton told The Associated Press she would place a hold on the nomination of Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt _ a procedural move that would prevent a Senate vote on his confirmation.

While the maneuver does not stop committee hearings on the nomination, a hold, by Senate tradition, blocks a full vote. Clinton said she would lift the hold only if the White House answered her concerns about the EPA report.

"This is a very big issue," she said in a telephone interview. "It not only has to do with the health and safety of the people I represent. It has to do with the credibility and trust of this entire government."

A White House spokesman said the administration was disappointed by the senator's comments.

"It's unfortunate that Sen. Clinton would seek to politicize such a qualified nominee as Gov. Leavitt," spokesman Taylor Gross said Saturday. "He is a known consensus builder and has brought people together to work on solutions for environmental improvement."


The report, issued by the EPA's inspector general Aug. 22, said the agency had given New Yorkers misleading assurances that there was no air-quality health risk after the World Trade Center collapsed in the 2001 terrorist attack.


The White House "convinced EPA to add reassuring statements and delete cautionary ones" by having the National Security Council control EPA


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communications after the attack, the report said.

For example, seven days after the attack, the EPA made an announcement that the air was "safe" to breathe, but the agency did not have enough information to make such a guarantee, the report found.

"When they would say, 'Oh, no, the air is safe,' there was a great sigh of relief," Clinton said. "But we know that many of the ground zero workers and volunteers are suffering from the World Trade Center cough, from asthma, from pulmonary respiratory distress."

The administration has defended its decision, saying it was justified by national security concerns.

"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," James Connaughton, chairman of the council that coordinates federal environmental efforts, said after the report's release.

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And the EPA's acting administrator, Marianne L. Horinko, has said the agency put out "the best information we had, based on just the best data that we had available at the time."

Bush nominated Leavitt, a Republican known as a moderate on environmental issues, to take over the EPA after administrator Christie Whitman announced she would leave the post.

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In the AP interview, Clinton said she held no personal grudge against Leavitt but was hoping to use the maneuver to force the administration to answer her questions about why it misled New Yorkers.

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"This is an effort to get the administration that he wants to join to take responsibility," she said.

Clinton has also called for another round of EPA testing for homes and businesses near the site of the attack.

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