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## Sen. Clinton to Block Bush EPA Nominee

By ERIN McCLAM

September 7, 2003, 6:36 AM EDT

NEW YORK -- Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton said Saturday she planned to block President Bush's nominee to head the Environmental Protection Agency over an internal report saying the EPA misled New Yorkers about health risks after the World Trade Center attack.

In a telephone interview, Clinton told The Associated Press she would place a hold on the nomination of Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, a procedural move that would prevent the full Senate from voting on his confirmation, though it does not stop committee hearings.

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

Clinton said she would lift the hold only if the White House answered her concerns about the EPA report. She said she held no personal grudge against Leavitt but hopes the hold to force the administration to answer questions.

"This is a very big issue," she said. "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 spokeswoman for Leavitt did not immediately return a call seeking comment. There was no immediate comment from the White House.

The report, issued by the EPA's inspector general Aug. 22, said the agency gave New Yorkers misleading assurances that there was no air-quality health risk after the Sept. 11, 2001, attack that spread debris, smoke and dust across lower Manhattan.

The White House "convinced EPA to add reassuring statements and delete cautionary ones" by having the National Security Council control EPA communications after the attack, said the report by EPA Inspector General Nikki L. Tinsley.

Seven days after the attack, the EPA announced that the air near ground zero 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

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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.

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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On the Net:

Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.gov>

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