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Local Congressman Riled About EPA Ombudsman

By JOHN WING jwing@tampatrib.com

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U.S. Rep. Michael Bilirakis has spent nearly a year fighting for an independent watchdog within the Environmental Protection Agency.

That fight, he said, will continue, despite a move by EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman that she says ensures an independent function for the EPA ombudsman.

Bilirakis said Wednesday he has "deep reservations" about Whitman's decision to move ombudsman Robert Martin from EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response to the agency's Office of Inspector General.

"This move honestly doesn't do what we wanted to do, which was to create a separate and independent office for the ombudsman," Bilirakis said.

The Palm Harbor Republican said the plan "still leaves questions about their ability to control their budget, their control over hiring and firing, and their ability to determine their own investigations."

He will argue before a House subcommittee Dec. 6 for legislation creating an independent ombudsman's office.

Martin and his then-chief investigator, Hugh Kaufman, looked into the Stauffer Superfund site in Tarpon Springs and helped force new studies into the EPA's cleanup plans for the 140 acres - plans local activists deemed flawed.

Since January, Martin's Stauffer investigation and his work at 23 other Superfund sites have stalled while the General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress, reviewed complaints of interference by the solid waste office. In September, a GAO report supported an independent office for Martin.

With questions remaining about how the ombudsman will function, Bilirakis said he doesn't expect a resumption of the ombudsman's probe at the Stauffer site soon.

"It's been a wait-and-see situation out there since Hugh was taken out of there," Bilirakis said. "And all we can do is keep pushing for some movement on this."

Reporter John Wing can be reached at (813) 779-4613.

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