

Administration moves to clean up polluted waterways

By H. Josef Hebert

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Washington – The Clinton administration defied Congress and imposed new pollution controls Tuesday to protect thousands of lakes and streams from agricultural and industrial pollution.

“This is the single most important program we can adopt to address the remaining water pollution problems in this country,” said Carol Browner, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Congressional Republicans and some farm-state Democrats, angered by what one lawmaker called an “EPA power grab,” were working on strategy to block the move, but it was unlikely that the rule would be rolled back.

President Clinton called it “a critical, common-sense step to ensure clean, safe water for all American” and said the WPA would work “in close partnership” with states and local communities to address the problem.

Under a regulation issued by the EPA, states must develop detailed plans to reduce pollution in more than 20,000 lakes, stream segments and bays that do not now meet minimum federal water quality standards.

Browner said it is aimed at cleaning up, over 15 years, the 40 percent of the nation’s waterways that are so dirty people are advised not to fish or swim in them.

The regulation, under consideration for four years, is opposed by a broad range of interests, including agriculture groups, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the utility industry and many governors.

Critics contend the requirements would cost billions and take away from states the flexibility needed to deal with water pollution problems. Browner denies that.

Congress had added language to a must-pass emergency spending bill that would bar the EPA from issuing the rules for 18 months.

Browner went ahead anyway, only days before Clinton expected to sign the legislation into law.

Opponents on Capital Hill have 60 legislative days to overturn the measure, but would have to muster a two-thirds vote because such an action would be subject to a presidential veto.

Browner said the regulation cannot be formally put into place until Oct. 1, 2001, to conform with the congressional language, but urged lawmakers to remove that restriction.

“This is nothing but an EPA power grab,” fumed Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo.

The regulation is the most ambitious attempt by the EPA to directly address the problem of waterways polluted as a result of runoff from agriculture, industrial activities, construction and other sources.

Instead of requirement specific plants or businesses to reduce pollution through restrictive permits, as already is done widely, the EPA wants states to examine thousands of waterways that do not meet federal water quality standards and produce a timetable for cleaning them up.

States must provide a list of polluted waterways and a cleanup schedule by April 2002, and then implement the cleanup over a 15-year period.

States must decide on the improvements such as tighter pollution controls on industry, agriculture and other sources.

If states do not produce the plans, the EPA may impose its own plan, much as it does now in dealing with air pollution across the country.