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GUEST EDITORIAL

Five continuing crises at EPA

William Ruckelshaus will be judged by history by the skill and vigor with which he moves to address five EPA crises: those concerning confidence, competence, stability, fundamental environmental science, and the Science Advisory Board.

The public and the dedicated work force of EPA have little confidence that the Reagan administration is committed to serving the public interest. The appointment of Ruckelshaus, with his reputation for integrity and independence, gives cause for hope that the EPA will rise from the ashes, but he may be handcuffed by the Watt-Coors group.

The crisis in competence at EPA stems from the recent loss of some of its best professionals. Funds for research in EPA were cut 50% at a time when we faced problems of enormous complexity. The Reaganites argued that not enough was known about the causes of acid rain to institute regulations, while simultaneously uttering their infamous slogan: "We will do more with less."

Now Ruckelshaus has the support of Congress to do whatever is necessary to rebuild EPA, but the Reagan administration is dragging its feet. Ruckelshaus worried aloud recently that Congress would provide more than he could wisely use. Instead of fretting, he should seize this opportunity to rebuild the science base. This can be done in a multitude of ways, but two of the most important are to hire some of the bright young people now available in the job market and to restore funding for research to pre-Reagan levels. In particular, the fundamental environmental science base in universities should be strengthened. EPA has a miserable record in fostering long-term anticipatory research, because as a regulatory agency it focuses on fire fighting, which crowds out fundamental research that might lead to more cost-effective, long-term solutions.

The crisis in stability in EPA is as harmful to regulated industries as it is to the morale of EPA profes-

sionals. An inordinately large number of key positions are occupied on an "acting" basis. Ruckelshaus should restore permanence and predictability by quickly appointing competent people on a permanent basis, irrespective of political affiliation.

The Science Advisory Board "hit list" was apparently developed to mute the advice of some of the more independent scientists. Ruckelshaus promised there would be no "hit lists" under his administration, but he has so far not moved to fight off another more insidious crisis in the Science Advisory Board: The Reagan administration recently instructed EPA (and other agencies) to stop paying honoraria to scientists and consultants serving on advisory boards and proposal review panels. The stated reason is that dedicated patriotic scientists should be willing to work for free, rather than the \$100 per day now provided. While the idea has popular appeal, it effectively discriminates against all but the independently wealthy and the hired guns of special interest groups. Resignations of professors and independent consultants are beginning because most cannot afford to consult without pay.

EPA will regain the scientists' confidence only if it is rejuvenated with adequate funding and competent personnel, and if it rebuilds the fundamental as well as the applied environmental sciences.

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