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News

POLITICS

Oil drilling in refuge appears dead

Head of EPA says plan would probably never pass Congress



People gather by a 200-foot by 30-foot sand sculpture at a resort in Islamorada, Fla., during Earth Day weekend activities.

Andy Newman / AFP

NBC NEWS AND WIRE REPORTS

WASHINGTON, April 22 — As activists around the country observed Earth Day Sunday, word came that the Bush administration no longer intends to push for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Christine Todd Whitman, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, told NBC News that the plan was essentially dead because it would be too hard to win congressional approval.

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IN A TIME MAGAZINE article Sunday, top presidential adviser Karl Rove said the administration was no longer going to push for the controversial plan, noting that eight Republican senators were against it.

Whitman, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" program, said of the plan: "It has to go through Congress and it will be difficult."

The 31st celebration of Earth Day on Sunday took on a different tone than in recent years with U.S. activists critical of Bush policies on the environment. Since George Bush took office in January, advocates for a variety of clean air, land and water issues have risen to battle decisions by the White House.

Uppermost in their minds are Bush's withdrawal of U.S. support for the Kyoto global warming treaty; support for logging in national forests; the plans for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; and suspension of rules approved by former President Clinton to cut arsenic in water.

Whitman, at the center of the political firestorm, defended Bush's policies, saying the president has taken "a lot of unfair hits" on the environment.

In a wide-ranging interview, Whitman defended the Bush administration on several fronts. Whitman said the one instance where Bush has reversed himself was on capping carbon dioxide limits and she said he did that because he was concerned about the energy crisis. The problem, she said, is that the demand for energy is outstripping the world's ability to provide it.

On other issues:

Arsenic levels in drinking water: A 1999 report by the National Academy of Sciences determined arsenic causes bladder, lung and skin cancer and may cause kidney and liver cancer. Both the European Union and the World Health

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April 22 — EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman is on the hot seat defending her decision to postpone lowering arsenic levels in water.

Organization have adopted a new standard for allowable arsenic in drinking water: 10 parts per billion (ppb). The Clinton administration proposed lowering the levels from 50 ppb to 10 ppb by 2006. The Bush administration reversed the order.

Whitman said everyone agrees that 50 ppb is too high, but that she recommended reversing the order to give water companies more time to find a way to finance improvements, so the companies don't close like some have done in the past, forcing residents to drill wells and have water with even higher arsenic levels.

"This was purely my decision," Whitman said.

She said she has also asked the National Academy of Sciences to determine what the safe level should be — anywhere from 3 ppb to 20 ppb.

"There's no definitive study that says with 10 (ppb) you're safe, 11 you're not," she said.

She said the administration will have a new rule in place in nine months and that the 2006 deadline will not be changed.

Kyoto protocol: Bush has been roundly criticized for backing out of the treaty on global warming. European leaders have been furious and have called his position "arrogant" and "irresponsible."

Bush has said the treaty's mandatory pollution reductions were too harmful to the American economy.

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Whitman said that Bush never supported the Kyoto Protocol and she said of the 54 nations who have signed on, only one — Romania — has ratified it.

The bottom line, she said, is that the Bush administration believes global climate change is a significant issue. "We

need to deal with greenhouse gases," she said.

She said she doesn't know if there will be an agreement.

Nuclear waste: Whitman said the real issue in nuclear waste is whether the nation can find a place to for spent nuclear rods. She said she believes it has it in the Yucca Mountains in Nevada. The challenge, she said, is to guarantee that the water will be safe to drink for the next 100,000 years.

FIRST HELD IN 1970

Earth Day, the special day to honor and protect the planet, was first held in 1970 and was credited with helping ignite the

environmental movement. This year the focus is on clean energy. There will be a solar power conference in Washington on Sunday, and cities across the globe this week staged “no car” days to sweep vehicles from streets and cleanse the air.

Greenhouse symptoms



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Organizers said 800 rallies were scheduled across the United States, with even more expected in 100 other nations.

Many activists have focused their attention on protest rallies in Quebec City, Canada, where leaders from 34 nations have

gathered for the Summit of the Americas, which coincides with this weekend’s observances.

PROTESTS OVER BUSH

Some activists have already declared Bush the worst steward of the environment in the history of the country, even though he has been in charge less than 100 days.

“Tragically, the president doesn’t have any interest at all in the issue,” former Senator Gaylord Nelson, credited with founding Earth Day, said in a speech Saturday.

Nelson criticized Bush’s decision last month to reject the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty aimed at reducing heat-trapping gases that cause global warming.

Greenpeace leaders and other activists chained themselves to the entrance of the EPA headquarters on Thursday to protest Bush. The Wilderness Society, in a report made public on Friday, said for the first time it has named the White House as the biggest threat to the future of national parks and monuments, blasting administration plans to open forests and other areas to mining, drilling and recreational sports like snowmobiling.

Wilderness Society President William Meadows identified Bush’s team “as the most environmentally hostile ever.”

MSNBC’s Bobbi Nodell and The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.

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