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EPA chief: Agency feeling heat from right and left

By Coral Davenport *National Journal* October 14, 2011

The Environmental Protection Agency faces an "unprecedented ... overreaction" as Republicans put Clean Air Act rules at the center of their political attack on so-called "job-killing" regulations, EPA administrator Lisa Jackson said on Friday.

But Jackson noted that several Obama administration moves also have angered environmentalists and some Democrats. The EPA is now actively seeking to mend fences on both sides of the political aisle, Jackson said at a breakfast event sponsored by *Politico*.

"We need to tell people who care deeply about the environment that we've made amazing strides," she said. "There's tons we've done and I don't think often enough we tell what we've done."

To some extent, EPA's slew of new pollution-control regulations, most of which require coal-fired power plants to curb emissions of greenhouse gases and toxins like mercury, arsenic, and sulfur dioxide, are a natural target for today's tea party-driven agenda against government regulation of industry. Republicans and so-called super PACs are putting the regulations at the center of their campaigns to defeat President Obama and reclaim the Senate in 2012.

On the other side, Jackson has come under attack lately from environmentalists who say her agency hasn't done enough on regulations. Many in the environmental community were deeply dismayed after Obama last month delayed a major rule that would have limited allowable smog, or ground-level ozone. Some environmentalists called on Jackson to step down over the decision.

While environmentalists aren't likely to cross party lines in 2012, their disappointment with the administration could dim the energy of a key part of the Democratic base, the same groups that helped get out the vote for Obama in 2008.

Jackson is touring farm states ahead of EPA's forthcoming rules on farm dust, claiming they won't harm agriculture's bottom line. The rule would rein in pollution of "particulate matter," which can be inhaled and damage lungs, and would cut down on air concentrations of soot and dust. Farm-state Republicans are working on legislation to block the rule.

Jackson said that if she had to do one thing differently in her tenure, she would have preemptively reached out to farmers to let them know about the farm-dust rules and what they entailed, rather than doing damage control after it became a partisan political issue.

"It is always harder to go back and talk to people after they've been frightened about what you do," she said. "I think I would have spent more time doing that proactively, had I known how quickly the seeds would spread."

Jackson said she will remind green groups that EPA brokered historic deals with auto companies to lower tailpipe emissions by 2025 and that it's in the process of implementing the nation's first-ever regulations on greenhouse gases that cause climate change.


She acknowledged EPA has another big decision that could anger environmentalists, depending which way it goes: In the coming weeks, EPA must recommend to the State Department whether it should approve the 1,700-mile Keystone XL pipeline, which would import oil extracted from the Canadian tar sands. Environmentalists, who demonstrated for weeks in front of the White House this summer against the pipeline, say approving it could be environmentally devastating, since the tar sands oil extraction process produces 30 percent to 70 percent more carbon emissions than standard oil production.

"That pipeline's a big issue," she said, declining to offer a hint of what her agency would recommend. To date, the State Department has given several signals that it is likely to approve the pipeline.

Jackson noted that the agency is reviewing the safety of the controversial natural-gas extraction method of hydraulic fracturing, known as fracking. The Obama administration has generally spoken favorably of fracking, since it allows production of cheap natural gas, which emits only half the carbon emissions of coal. But it has come under scrutiny as many fear the fracking process could contaminate water tables. The fossil-fuel industry has resisted any regulations on fracking.


"When it comes to natural-gas development, the key is to make sure that we say, 'Engineers, make sure we do it safely without harming water supplies,' and I think we're well on the way," said Jackson. "On chemicals, we don't have data that shows those chemicals showing up in someone's well. Over time that may not be a true statement. Unless there's a problem with well construction, [hydrofracking chemicals] shouldn't end up in aquifers."

For now, companies aren't required to disclose which chemicals they inject in the ground during hydrofracking, but, Jackson said, "disclosure of those chemicals is a very good idea."



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