

What's an older person's life worth?

Tuesday, April 15, 2003

By Don Hopey, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is coming to Pittsburgh next week and could get an earful on its plan to place a lesser value on the lives of senior citizens when calculating the benefits of environmental regulations.

Dubbed the "Senior Death Discount" by environmental groups, the Bush administration has proposed reducing the value of a senior citizen's life to 63 percent or less of the \$6.1 million value per individual it uses when doing required cost-benefit analysis for environmental programs.

"I resent it," said Jo Ann Evansgardner, 77, of Hazelwood. "It's a very slippery slope. How can they decide at what age to discount the value of a life? And what's to stop them from then reducing the value of a disabled person, whose quality of life might not be the same as someone else, or that of a sick baby or the chronically ill?"

Industries and power plants could benefit from the proposed change in the value of life. Regulators must weigh benefits against costs for regulations expected to have economic effects greater than \$100 million, so lower life values could have the effect of limiting the reach of anti-pollution rules.

Evansgardner plans to register before tomorrow's deadline to speak at the EPA meeting. It will be held from 2 to 4 p.m., April 23, at the Pittsburgh Athletic Association Pennsylvania Room, 4215 Fifth Ave., Oakland.

The EPA is holding the "listening sessions" in Pittsburgh and five other cities across the country to gather information and views about environmental hazards that affect the health of the elderly. The information also will be used to aid in development of a National Agenda on the Environment and Aging. The agenda will build on EPA's ongoing aging research, identify research gaps in environmental health and develop strategies to prepare for a rapidly aging population.

The first meeting in Tampa attracted 50 seniors.

"By opening up this process and encouraging this type of active participation we can expect to gain a more complete understanding of the environmental health issues of most concern and the most effective ways to address those issues," said EPA Administrator Christie Whitman, who has canceled her previously scheduled attendance at the Pittsburgh meeting and one next month in Baltimore. "I know that this listening session will lend valuable insight and direction to our efforts."

There are 35 million people in the United States 65 years of age and older, and that number

is expected to double over the next 30 years.

Among older Americans there is an increasing number who are at risk of chronic diseases and disabling conditions that may be caused or exacerbated by environmental conditions, including lead contamination, indoor and outdoor air pollution, microorganisms in water and pesticides.

Heart disease, cancer and stroke have been the leading causes of death for persons 65 years and older, and each of those diseases is worsened by air pollution, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

But the Bush administration's efforts to refine the way the EPA calculates the costs and benefits of major anti-pollution regulations could limit the reach of air pollution regulations.

When performing a cost-benefit analysis of a proposal to limit snowmobile pollution in the national parks, the administration reduced the value of a life to \$3.7 million per person and \$2.3 million for anyone over age 70. So instead of having a benefit of \$77 billion by 2030, the health benefits of the proposal were recalculated to \$8.8 billion and deemed not worth implementing.

Under the Bush administration's Clear Skies plan for controlling air pollution from power plants, the value of lives of some people who will benefit from cleaner air in the northeastern United States is calculated as low as \$96,000, less than 2 percent of the measure that has been used since George H.W. Bush was president.

To register to speak at the EPA listening session, call 1-866-372-2433. Individuals can also leave spoken comments using this number.

Those who would like to submit written comments should send them to: EPA's Aging Initiative, Room 2512 Ariel Rios North, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20460. The Web site for registering to attend or speak is www.epa.gov/aging/listening/index.htm.

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EPA gets an earful on plan to 'discount' seniors' lives

Thursday, April 24, 2003

By Don Hopey, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Marilyn Skolnick, a senior citizen and longtime Sierra Club leader, shuffled to the microphone and was given the courtesy of a chair while she testified at yesterday's U.S. Environmental Protection Agency public meeting in Pittsburgh on environmental issues affecting the aged.

In her seated position she turned the agency and the Bush administration over her knee to give them a virtual spanking for seeking to weaken clean air rules and for discounting the value of seniors' lives by 37 percent when calculating the benefits of new environmental rules.

"To consider lessening the value of human life so that corporations can continue to pollute is moral and scientific recklessness," Skolnick told a panel of federal, state and county environmental and health officials. "I like breathing clean air today as much as I did when I was a young woman."

She was joined in the public swatting of the administration and its environmental agency by the vast majority of the 32 speakers, most of them "chronologically superior," at the EPA-sponsored three-hour "listening session" in the Pittsburgh Athletic Association in Oakland.

The meeting was the third of six EPA listening sessions being held around the nation to discuss and develop a national agenda on environmental issues affecting older people. The meeting testimony will be used to identify issues of concern and research gaps in environmental health, and then to develop strategies to prepare for a rapidly aging population.

Those testifying yesterday urged the EPA to pay attention to a variety of issues such as indoor air quality, power plant emissions, water supply pollution, subsidence from longwall mining, smog, the lack of data on the cumulative effects of pollutants and the disproportionate effects of pollution on minority neighborhoods.

But almost all were critical of the Bush administration for proposing what has been dubbed by critics the "Senior Death Discount." Several pointed out that seniors' votes are not discounted 37 percent and that they vote in higher percentages than the general population. They said that might be one reason the EPA has sought to distance itself from the proposal

EPA regional administrator Donald Welsh used his opening remarks to tell the 70 people

who attended the listening session that using a reduced value for the lives of seniors is a proposal by the administration's Office of Management and Budget.

"The so-called Senior Death Discount was a new issue to me a few weeks ago," Welsh said after the meeting. "EPA officials in Washington told me we're not going to use it."

But those delivering testimony turned a deaf ear.

"Given that senior citizens suffer greater health hazards from ingesting polluted air, it is extremely biased and unfair for the federal government to decide that seniors should be given a lesser value than younger people when deciding their worth under air quality regulations," said Joan Flood, senior organizer for the East End Neighborhood Forum, a coalition of more than a dozen organizations and community based corporations.

"Cheapening the lives of seniors in this way creates an atmosphere whereby the loss of human life is deemed acceptable and cost effective."

Lisa Graves Marcucci, mother of two asthmatic children and a community activist from Jefferson Hills, said the EPA has disavowed the OMB plan, but used it in calculating costs and benefits of the administration's proposed Clear Skies Program and the off-road diesel engine controls.

"The Senior Death Discount isn't the work of some other agency, it's the work of the White House," Marcucci said. "If finalized, it will affect all federal agencies, including EPA."

The OMB proposal would reduce the value of a senior citizen's life to 63 percent or less of the \$6.1 million value per individual the federal government uses when doing cost-benefit analysis for environmental programs. Regulators must weigh benefits against costs for regulations expected to have economic effects greater than \$100 million, so lower life values could limit the reach of anti-pollution rules.

Industries and power plants could benefit from the proposed change in the value of life. Environmental groups say it could be used to undermine new regulations by reducing their monetary benefits when compared to their regulatory costs.

There are 35 million people in the United States 65 and older, and that number is expected to double over the next 30 years.

(Don Hopey can be reached at dhopey@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1983.)

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EPA finds life worth the same at age 70; Speaking in Baltimore, Whitman announces end to age-adjusted analyses

May 8, 2003

After months of criticism, federal regulators announced yesterday that the life of a senior citizen is indeed worth as much as anyone else's.

At a meeting in Baltimore, the Environmental Protection Agency's chief said the organization would stop the contentious practice of placing a lower dollar value on the lives of people over 70 when it calculates the cost and benefits of legislation before Congress.

Derisively known as the "senior death discount," the policy had been criticized as a tool used by the Bush administration to reduce the estimated benefits of cleaning up the nation's air.

Christine Todd Whitman, the EPA administrator, announced the change unexpectedly to a group gathered at the University of Maryland School of Nursing for the agency's sixth and final listening session for older Americans nationwide.

The disputed formula estimated the worth of someone over 70 at 37 percent less than a younger person, or \$2.3 million vs. \$3.7 million. The age-adjusted analysis was used to explain the benefits of the Bush administration's Clear Skies legislation to Congress.

Whitman said yesterday that the methodology was never reviewed by EPA scientific experts but came directly from the White House Office of Management and Budget.

"That particular form of analysis has been discontinued," she said. "The bottom line is that the EPA will not use an age-adjusted analysis on any regulations that it promulgates."

Opponents say the policy short-changed both seniors and the nation. "I think it's blatantly discriminatory," said Jo Reed, coordinator of federal affairs and consumer issues for the AARP.

Reed argued that placing less value on seniors in evaluating federal mandates could weaken efforts to win money for cancer research and other programs for the elderly.

"You end up skewing the results of any analysis you do so that they favor inaction," she said.

Similar senior citizen forums in other cities brought out protesters who wore stickers that read "Senior Discount, 37 percent Off." But there were no demonstrators at the forum in Baltimore yesterday, and Whitman's announcement caught opponents by surprise.

"We're very heartened, but talk is cheap," said John Stanton, vice president of the National Environmental Trust.

Putting a dollar cost on lives is not uncommon in federal regulations. Under the assumption that cleaning up the air saves lives, the EPA calculates the benefits of particular rules against their cost to industry. The leading causes of death for those over 65 are heart disease, cancer and stroke, all of which are exacerbated by air pollution.

The "senior discount" cost-benefit analysis was developed by John Graham, the White House regulatory czar, and has been part of the discussion of the administration's Clear Skies Act.

The bill would require power plants and other industries to reduce emissions by setting specific limits for sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and mercury. However, it would allow industries to exceed current emission levels by trading pollution credits among themselves.

The dollar value of Clear Skies under a formula that treated all lives equally was about \$41 billion over seven years, but it dropped to \$7 billion with the age adjustment.

Environmentalists charged the Bush administration with using the "senior discount" to play down the benefits of reducing air pollution and weaken arguments for stricter Clean Air Act regulations.

"It's using fuzzy math to justify give-aways to the power plants and to other industries," said Zach Corrigan, a lawyer with the Maryland Public Interest Research Group.

Stanton, of the National Environmental Trust, said Whitman mentioned the age-adjusted analysis when she testified before Congress recently and said he was mystified by her reversal.

"We're going to have to see how this all plays out," he said.

But information - and not public pressure - prompted federal officials to drop the age adjustment, Graham said in an interview yesterday.

He said surveys by a Washington think-tank, Resources for the Future, prompted him to question some of the numbers he had used in his calculations.

Graham, 46, a former Harvard professor and authority on cost-benefit analysis, defended age adjustment as an accepted method of calculating the benefits of a federal policy or regulation. He said that he taught the practice at Harvard and that it was first used by British researchers in the 1980s.

"It's a fundamental tool," he said.

Graham said the next revision of EPA formulas will place a premium on the years of life remaining for senior citizens.

He said that under the new calculations, the same dollar value will be placed on every life. But because the elderly have fewer years remaining, the potential benefit under Clear Skies for seniors, redefined as those 65 and older, would be \$263,000 a year, compared with \$172,000 for younger Americans.

But Graham's method of assigning a lower dollar value to an elderly life has support among some academics.

"It's a controversial idea, but it makes sense to a lot of people," said Cass Sunstein, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago Law School.

Sunstein said that given limited resources, most people would favor spending money to benefit children than to help the elderly.

"I don't think it's right to consider old people's lives as irrelevant," said Sunstein, 48. "But if you have to choose and you can save 15 people who are 10, that's better than saving 15 people who are 80, or who are my age."

Dennis O'Brien-SUN STAFF

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EPA's Whitman submits resignation letter

'It is time to return to my home'

WASHINGTON (CNN) --Christie Whitman, sometimes cast as a lone voice on Bush environmental matters, announced Wednesday she will soon step down as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

In her resignation letter posted on the EPA's Web site, the former New Jersey governor cited a desire to spend more time with her family. Her resignation will be effective June 27.

"I am proud of the work this agency has done and of the contributions it has made to the success of your administration," Whitman, 56, said in a letter addressed to President Bush and dated May 20. "... It has been a true honor to be able to lead this agency as it worked to implement the innovative, effective environmental policies to which you are so clearly committed." ([Text of letter](#))

Whitman is the most prominent woman to leave the administration.

In a statement, Bush praised Whitman, saying she "served my administration exceptionally well."

Environmentalists have long suggested Whitman was unhappy with the White House over several key environmental policies, but she has steadfastly said she was happy in her work.

In a statement, Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope said Whitman was often at odds with the Bush administration on policy matters.

"Under the circumstances, Christie Whitman did the best she could at the EPA, but the Bush administration simply wouldn't allow her to do the job," Pope said. As an example, he cited what he described as a broken campaign pledge by Bush to curb carbon dioxide emissions.

And National Environment Trust President Philip E. Clapp said, "Whitman must feel like her own long national nightmare is finally over."

But, in an interview with CNN, Whitman insisted that was not the case.

"I'm not leaving because of clashes with the administration; in fact, I haven't had any," she said. "There's always give and take ... The president has always wanted my unadulterated opinion and that doesn't mean that you're having a battle about it."

Whitman said Bush was "very gracious" when she approached him about her decision and "indicated he wished I would stay but understood my reasons for leaving."

In her resignation letter, Whitman gives no hint of displeasure and highlights what she describes as the administration's successful efforts to clean the country's air, water and land.

"Our work has been guided by the strong belief that environmental protection and economic prosperity can and must go hand-in-hand, that the true measure of the value of any environmental policy is in the environmental results it produces," she wrote.

Whitman, a once-rising political star in GOP circles, said she wanted to "take a little time for myself" and had "no plans to run for any office" -- although she didn't rule it out.

"As you know in this business, you never say never to anything," she said.

U.S. officials characterized her departure as routine and noted that Bush has had remarkably low turnover in senior positions.

"As rewarding as the past two-and-a-half years have been for me professionally, it is time to return to my home and husband in New Jersey, which I love just as you do your home state of Texas," Whitman said in her resignation letter.

Cabinet officials and other senior staffers have been encouraged to leave by this summer if they do not wish to stay on through the 2004 campaign year so that Bush does not have to deal with high-level staff and agency appointments in the heat of an election season.


The officials cast Whitman's decision in this light and noted she had always said she did not envision staying in Washington for too long.

White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer cited the coming campaign in his decision to resign effective this summer. ([Full story](#))

--Senior White House Correspondent John King contributed to this report.

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