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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

The EPA in Trouble

YOU'LL GET NO argument from us: there are things that are wrong with the Environmental Protection Agency. Like every government agency, it has been guilty of its share of bureaucratic nit-picking, delay and overly burdensome regulations. Yet EPA has much to be commended for, and is among the best of the regulatory agencies. It has a lean, not a swollen, bureaucracy. It has far more than the usual number of intelligent and motivated workers. It is one of the rare agencies to have tried innovative approaches to regulation. Since its establishment during the Nixon presidency, it has preserved a solid base of bipartisan support. Now, however, unless Congress can prevent it, the agency is in danger of being crippled if not in fact dismantled.

Like most other federal agencies, EPA took a 12 percent cut in its budget during the first round of cuts earlier this year. It is also included among the agencies slated for a second cut of equal size for the coming fiscal year. A recently leaked document reveals that on top of this the EPA's current head, Anne Gorsuch, is proposing to volunteer an additional 20 percent cut—that's before the OMB budget cutters go to work—for fiscal year 1983. That document also reveals Mrs. Gorsuch's plans to cut the agency's work force by 31 percent in those years, in addition to losses by attrition of 6 percent a year. The cuts in money and personnel add up to an agency cut nearly in half by the end of 1984.

The EPA is responsible for cleaning up the country's air and water; ensuring the safety and safe use of the billion-plus pounds of pesticides used each year; seeing to the safe disposal of the 40 million tons of hazardous waste generated annually, while finding, monitoring and cleaning up where necessary the several thousand old waste sites scattered around the country; setting safe exposure levels for radioactivity; and for the 70,000 chemicals now in commercial use and seeing that the several thousand new ones introduced each year are safe. Among EPA's smaller programs are many that, like the auto mileage tests, are part of the fabric of everyday living. The agency also runs a large research program, covering everything from pollution control technologies to the chemistry of soil. For all this, EPA's work force of 10,381 employees seems anything but excessive.

The tasks are prodigious and growing. If the polls are right, they are also tasks the public wants accomplished. The White House last summer decided, wisely, against a major effort to weaken the Clean Air Act. But dismantling the EPA through wholesale budget cuts would accomplish the same end—and more. Congress should press the White House to put an end to the carnage while there is still time. EPA, with all its faults, performs an essential—in fact, a life-and-death—public service. It needs to be maintained.

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