

Congressional Closeup by William Jones and Carl Osgood

Cabinet status for EPA gets House panel okay

The House Government Operations Committee on Nov. 4 approved a bill to make the Environmental Protection Agency a cabinet-level department. The bill to create the federal government's 15th cabinet department is similar to legislation passed by the Senate in May. The bill renames the EPA the Department of Environmental Protection, reforms its oversight of federal contractors, and creates separate agencies to collect environmental statistics, ensure environmental justice for minority communities, and assess environmental risks. The House could vote on the bill as early as mid-November.

The House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee is also expected to approve a bill to abolish the White House Council on Environmental Quality, create a new office to oversee the National Environmental Policy Act, and transfer CEQ's remaining authority to the EPA and the Office on Environmental Policy. The two bills will then be merged on the House floor, according to sources.

The Senate bill requires the EPA to do cost-benefit analyses on all regulations they may institute, a measure which opponents hope will halt some of the more radical environmental proposals by exposing their cost. Administration officials say they will fight to have that provision removed in conference.

Cabinet status would greatly enhance the EPA's powers. The EPA "oversees more laws that affect more federal agencies than any other department head," said Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), sponsor of the House bill.

The administration argues that elevating the EPA would give it more clout internationally, while ensuring that environmental concerns remain

integral to U.S. policy decisions, even under future administrations. As EPA Administrator Carol Browner put it on Nov. 3 at a press conference on Capitol Hill, "This legislation will ensure that environmental concerns continue to be in the middle, not at the margins, of all policy decisions. . . . The environmental concerns will be part and parcel of the decision-making, not just for this administration but for future generations." Vice President Al Gore, attending the press conference, said the Conyers bill would put the "EPA elbow-to-elbow with the other major players in the government."

President wins victory on troops in Somalia

The House Foreign Affairs Committee approved by a vote of 22-21 on Nov. 3 a resolution supporting President Clinton's plan to keep U.S. troops in Somalia until March 31, thereby narrowly averting a measure offered by Republican members which would have brought 11,000 U.S. troops back by Jan. 31. The Senate had voted on Oct. 15 to support Clinton's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Somalia by March 31.

The proposal to force earlier withdrawal was put forward by Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), the committee's ranking Republican, and won support from all 18 Republicans plus three Democrats on the committee. "Let's face it, the U.S. mission in Somalia has changed from saving lives to saving face," Gilman said. "It is not worth one American life to help the authors of a failed policy save face."

Committee Chairman Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) said the Republican proposal would undermine Clinton's effort to bring about a peace agreement. "If we pull the plug now,

the outcome will be starvation," Hamilton warned.

Clinton announced the March 31 pullout in response to an outcry for immediate withdrawal after 18 American soldiers were killed by Somali gunmen on Oct. 3. Gilman introduced his resolution relying on the War Powers Act, which was enacted into law by Congress over President Richard Nixon's veto after the Vietnam War. It prohibits Presidents from committing U.S. combat forces abroad for more than 90 days without Congress' approval.

Crime legislation passed in sections

The House passed on Nov. 4 a \$3.5 billion measure to put 50,000 more police on the streets. It also passed three other measures which mandate drug treatment for federal prisoners, authorize \$100 million in state grants to reduce gang activities and drug trafficking by juveniles, and authorize \$100 million for drug treatment for state prison inmates. The bills were part of the omnibus crime bill which was dismantled because of opposition to some of the death penalty clauses.

The House rejected a measure which would have set up "boot camps" and other alternative punishments for offenders up to age 22. This measure, under special rules for the vote, required two-thirds approval for passage.

On the same day, the Senate approved \$22 billion to fight violent crime by hiring 100,000 more police officers and building more prisons. The bill also contains a "hate crimes" amendment, which provides "sentencing enhancement" of not more than three offense levels (which would increase sentences by approximately one-third) if the crime

is characterized as a "hate crime." This amendment was approved by a vote of 95-6.

The Senate also approved sentences of mandatory life imprisonment without parole for anyone found guilty in federal court of a third violent felony. The measure was proposed by Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.). "Three strikes and you're out," Lott commented. A measure which would have barred death sentences for anyone younger than 18 who committed a murder was rejected.

Merger of bank agencies proposed

Sen. Don Riegle (D-Mich.), chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, and Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) introduced legislation on Nov. 8 that would create a single agency to regulate the banking industry. The bill would merge the Comptroller of the Currency, the Federal Reserve Board, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., and the Office of Thrift Supervision into a single Federal Banking Commission.

The legislation reflects "the need to modernize and streamline the outdated anachronistic system," said Riegle. "Opponents of this long overdue change are the agency bureaucrats bent on protecting their fiefdoms," D'Amato added. Riegle, D'Amato, and House Banking Committee Chairman Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.) also sent a letter to the White House, urging it to support the legislation.

In response to this and to efforts by Gonzalez to bring the Fed under the control of the government in accord with the U.S. Constitution, Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has introduced legislation to re-

form the Federal Reserve, which he hopes will assuage its opponents without changing the way the Fed does business. Hamilton says that his proposal would make the Fed "more accountable to the American people." It would: 1) make the Federal Reserve bank presidents, who are appointed primarily by commercial banks, "advisers" rather than voting members of the Federal Open Market Committee; 2) require the members of the FOMC to meet with the President's top economic advisers periodically, to improve communication between the President and the Fed; 3) enable the President to appoint a Fed chairman in the first year of his administration, instead of the last; 4) require the Fed to announce immediately any changes in monetary policy, including changes in interest rates; and 5) give the Government Accounting Office more responsibility to audit the Fed.

Hamilton assured supporters of the Fed that his bill would not give "the President or the Congress more control over monetary policy. I do not believe that such a change should be made. . . . The basic independence of the Fed is not something that needs to be altered."

Compromise forced through on grazing fees

On Nov. 9, Senate leaders abandoned attempts to increase grazing fees and tighten rules for using federal range lands, after they failed to break a filibuster by Western senators opposed to increased environmental restrictions sought by the administration.

The Department of the Interior could now implement changes administratively, but an official indicated that these changes would be less drastic than those originally put forward

by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. "We want to take everybody's temperature and see where we are," said Tom Collier, Babbitt's chief of staff.

Dole requests GAO probe of U.N. humanitarian aid

Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (R-Kan.), in a letter to Comptroller General Charles Bowsher, has requested a General Accounting Office (GAO) investigation of allegations that the U.N. is using humanitarian aid to further "the flawed Owen/Stoltenberg negotiations" over Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"I am writing in regard to the United States and United Nations practices regarding the provision of humanitarian assistance to Bosnia-Herzegovina. I am deeply concerned about reports that the United Nations is engaged in the manipulation and use of humanitarian assistance for political objectives. In view of the fact that the United States is the largest contributor to the United Nations, and has the largest bilateral humanitarian assistance program for Bosnia-Herzegovina, I am requesting that the GAO investigate," he wrote.

"There are indications that U.N. officials have prevented the creation of large stockpiles of food and medicine in Bosnia, apparently to avoid giving the Bosnian government hope that it can survive another winter without a peace settlement. Such efforts would violate congressional intent and legislative language regarding the provision of humanitarian aid."

Dole instructs the GAO to examine 11 questions, and whether U.S. government agencies had knowledge of or were witting participants in U.N. manipulation of aid for political purposes.