

For Release  
on Delivery  
Expected at  
2:00 p.m. EST  
Wednesday  
February 7, 1990

Creation of a Department  
of Environmental Protection  
(H.R. 3847)

Statement of  
J. Dexter Beach, Assistant Comptroller General  
Resources, Community, Economic Development  
Division

Before the Legislation and National Security  
Subcommittee  
Committee on Government Operations  
House of Representatives



GA7679 / 140568

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to

offer our views on the creation of a Department of Environmental

Protection and on H.R. 3847. Accompanying me is Richard L. Hembra,

Director for Environmental Protection Issues, U.S. General

Accounting Office (GAO).

As we indicated in our testimony before the Committee last

June, GAO supports the creation of a cabinet department for

environmental protection. Conferring cabinet status on the

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) not only symbolizes the

growing importance of the agency. It is an action that should

also, in the long term, position the agency to more effectively

address the considerable environmental challenges this nation will

face in coming years.

Since EPA was created in 1970, the nation's understanding of

environmental problems has grown enormously, and with it, EPA's

responsibilities. Today, EPA's mission, size, and scope of

responsibilities place it on a par with many cabinet departments.

From my own involvement in GAO's work at the Departments of Energy,

Interior, Agriculture, and Transportation, I am very aware of the

---

1 Creation of a Department of Environmental Protection, Statement  
of Harry S. Havens, Assistant Comptroller General, Office of the  
Comptroller General, Before the Legislation and National Security  
Subcommittee, Government Operations Committee, House of  
Representatives (GAO/T-RCED-89-52, June 21, 1989).

international environmental issues have assumed. It also appropriately recognizes the increasing importance that global and creation of an Office of International Environmental Affairs

-- Office of International Environmental Affairs: The

focus on some of the bill's components:

should enhance its effectiveness. Let me spend a few minutes management changes. Overall, these additions to the Department as well as a commission to examine future organizational and calls for the creation of new organizations within the Department We are pleased to see that this Committee's current proposal

matters.

organization's direct access to the President on environmental from a long-term institutional standpoint, make clear the Finally, establishing the head of EPA as a cabinet member would, federal government as well as in the international community. head to deal effectively as an equal with counterparts in the departments. Conferring cabinet status on EPA would also help its domestic and foreign policies that are carried out by other cabinet environmental policy is given appropriate weight in relation to Elevating EPA to cabinet status should help ensure that

departments.

interplay between environmental issues and the programs of these

2 Environmental Protection Agency: Protecting Human Health and the Environment through Improved Management (GAO/RCE-D-88-101, Aug. 16, 1988).

Although EPA has had some limited success in developing environmental indicators, it needs to do considerably more work in this area. As a focal point for information collection within the new Department, a Center for Environmental Statistics could

and which are not.

activities to determine which are successful in correcting problems link its knowledge of these conditions with its programs and conditions are a health hazard. Moreover, EPA should be able to need to be most or least concerned about, or where environmental are most improved or most degraded, what regions of the country we would be able to tell, for example, what aspects of the environment environment. With better information, EPA, or the new Department, programs are having any measurable effect on the quality of the improvements. EPA now has difficulty assessing whether its ability to manage its programs to obtain environmental environmental data would considerably strengthen the agency's management review of EPA, 2 we believe that a greater emphasis on From many of our reviews and, in particular, our general to see a provision creating a Center for Environmental Statistics. -- Center for Environmental Statistics: We are also pleased

strengthen the prominent role that the Administration has given EPA in international deliberations on the environment.

different approach.

Drinking Water Act--but each of these laws requires an altogether conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), the Superfund, and the Safe for example, is a purpose of three different laws--the Resource to achieve it. Protecting drinking water from chemical pollution, some cases, share the same goal, but they dictate different means in measuring health and environmental risks. These laws may, in regulate, which standards to be used, and which values to be used sometimes conflicting requirements governing which substances to implementing numerous environmental laws, with separate and statute for the new Department. EPA is now responsible for would be the desirability of an organic, unified environmental A particularly worthwhile issue for the Commission to address

outlined in the bill.

the management, organizational and jurisdictional issues that are of a Commission on Environmental Administration that will examine Cabinet department. We are therefore pleased to see the creation questions would remain to be addressed even if EPA becomes a indicated in our earlier testimony to you, several problems and -- Commission on Environmental Administration: As we

linked to the Department's actions to protect the environment. the environment, but it could also provide measures that can be not only inform the Department and the public about the state of

Differing legislative requirements make it difficult for EPA to deal with the whole environment in an integrated and efficient way. For this reason, some have advocated a single organic statute that would cover all forms of pollution uniformly. Given the growing list of environmental problems and the limited capacity of the federal government to pay for their resolution, we think that the time is right to identify ways in which the federal government can make the most of the resources it applies to solving environmental problems and attaining national goals.

-- Office of an Ombudsman: Although, unlike earlier drafts, the Committee's current proposal no longer calls for the creation of an Ombudsman for the Department, you asked us to offer our views on the desirability of such a position. While we have not conducted our own analyses, we are aware that other federal agencies, including the Internal Revenue Service, have had successful ombudsman programs, as have government organizations in other countries, where ombudsmen have long been used to handle complaints and resolve disputes between members of the public and government officials. EPA already has several ombudsmen, including a small business ombudsman and two that are required by law--one for hazardous and solid waste and another for asbestos. According to an outside evaluation of EPA's hazardous waste ombudsman office, program managers and users found the office to be a valuable resource. This committee may therefore wish to look further at the desirability of having a single ombudsman for the new Department,

Hembra and I would be pleased to respond to any questions.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. Mr.

environmental agenda that awaits us in the years ahead.

more effective organization for addressing the difficult

Protection could ultimately provide the United States with a far

that I have commented on today, a Department of Environmental

the federal role in environmental protection. With the additions

department is an affirmation of the prominence and permanence of

In summary, Mr. Chairman, elevating EPA to a cabinet

CONCLUSION

could more than pay for themselves in the long run.

concerns I addressed earlier, we believe that such investments

Administration. Nonetheless, in light of the long-standing

Environmental Statistics and the Commission on Environmental

Department's costs--specifically, the creation of a center for

consideration contains additional features that could add to the

to a department should be relatively minimal. The bill now under

Office has reported to you that the costs of simply converting EPA

implementing the provisions of H.R. 3847, the Congressional Budget

-- Costs: Although we have not analyzed the costs of

functions that now exist in EPA.

particularly with an eye toward consolidating the several ombudsmen