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WHITE HOUSE:

New environmental indicators sought to help guide policy (06/17/2008)

Katherine Boyle, Greenwire reporter

The White House today **directed** federal agencies to begin developing a set of national environmental indicators that will help inform policymaking.

The Council on Environmental Quality, the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Science and Technology Policy will coordinate the initiative, which kicks off with a pilot project aimed at measuring water quality and quantity.

The White House says the indicators will be used to analyze national trends and assess the effects of national programs on the environment. Agencies are expected to work within their existing budgets to develop the indicators, an aspect of the plan the Sierra Club said was unrealistic.

"I don't think it can be done within the current budget," said Ed Hopkins, director of the club's environmental quality program. "It is expensive to develop the kind of data that they are looking for, and it would be useful to do, but it's not free."

Hopkins also noted that the stated goal of the program does not jibe with recent cuts to the U.S. Geological Survey's National Water-Quality Assessment Program. The Bush administration's fiscal 2009 budget proposal sliced the program's funding by 15 percent, which agency officials said would halt key data collection initiatives like groundwater and drinking water monitoring ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 8).

"It might be possible to take this letter seriously if it didn't come from the same administration that has been cutting the USGS budget for water quality work every year since it's gotten in office," Hopkins said. "Suggesting they develop these indicators while at the same time cutting the budget of the agency that provides the best science-based water quality information available is just completely inconsistent."

However, Council on Environmental Quality Chairman Jim Connaughton suggested most indicators could be produced from data collected by ongoing federal and state programs.

"This action plan will improve the quality and uniformity of those data to provide nationally consistent, and more widely accessible, indicators," Connaughton said. The plan was based on recommendations by the National Academy of Public Administration.

Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said the program is headed in the right direction. "We'll have to see what kind of response they get back from the agencies," he added. "We'll see how it goes."

The directive arrived as the Heinz Center released its national assessment of U.S. natural resources, accompanied by a roadmap for lawmakers that recommended Congress authorize a set of national indicators and increase funding for environmental data collection (*see related story*).



John Marburger III, director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, noted that the Heinz Center's research has been very useful but said it is now time to take the development of national indicators to the next level with a federal initiative.

And Thomas Lovejoy, president of the Heinz Center, welcomed the program.

"This represents recognition of the importance of these kinds of indicators; the time has come -- it's overdue -- for this," Lovejoy said. "We can only hope that beyond the announcement, this will be fulfilled."

Federal agencies are good at looking at issues within their own jurisdiction, but assessments across agencies or geographical bounds are lacking, said Lovejoy.

Allison Winter contributed to this report.