

Republicans Defect to Kill

House Rejects Provisions Limiting Agency's Power to Enforce

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Pro-environment Republicans in the House yesterday staked out their independence from their leadership by joining Democrats to throw out a broad package of provisions curbing the Environmental Protection Agency's enforcement of clean air and water standards.

The 212-to-206 vote was a significant setback for a GOP-backed campaign to ease federal regulation of business, and made clear that Republicans in the crowded Northeast and Florida are under strong pressure from constituents to uphold the antipollution gains of recent years.

"I'm green all over," beamed Rep. Sherwood L. Boehlert (R-N.Y.), leader of a group of 51 Republicans who voted to strike 17 controversial environmental riders from a \$60 billion measure funding environmental, housing, veterans, space and other programs beginning Oct. 1. "Republicans will be in power for another generation if they do two things: soften some of the hard edges and don't turn their back on the environment," he said.

Republican leaders, after abruptly moving to halt debate on the bill for the weekend, indicated that they would offer a scaled-down proposal, possibly with as many as six fewer riders, when Congress reconvenes Monday.

The White House hailed the vote. "This is the day the clear and concerted effort by the Republican leadership to roll back environmental

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protection was stopped on one important vote," Vice President Gore said. "This may be looked back upon as a turning point." But he cautioned that "even without the special riders that were voted down today, this particular appropriations bill was already so bad for the environment that even this vote doesn't come close to rehabilitating it to the point where it could be signed."

EPA Administrator Carol M. Browner charged that Republicans are giving undue influence to industry lobbyists. "I will tell you that we have seen sentences in bills and we can tell you which law firm downtown wrote that sentence because they have argued it in a case against us," she said.

The vote came at an inopportune time for the House GOP command, which has worked around the clock this week to maintain party unity in the face of mini-rebellions from warring factions over abortion, affirmative action and spending priorities.

Earlier in the week, 44 Republicans joined Democrats to

throw out a provision in a transportation spending measure that would have removed some of the collective bargaining protections of mass transit workers. That action was a victory for organized labor over pro-business GOP conservatives.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.) must now work out a compromise between antiabortion and abortion-rights factions within the party. Both have threatened to scuttle a \$60 billion labor, education and human services bill unless their demands are met.

Abortion rights advocates are adamant that they get a chance on the House floor next week to resurrect the Nixon-era "Title X" family planning program, knocked out by antiabortion forces in committee.

On yet another point of friction, Rep. Gary A. Franks (Conn.), one of two black Republican members, said yesterday he had been promised repeatedly that he would be allowed to try to attach a rider to a defense spending bill barring race- or gender-based set-asides in federal contracts.

But late in the day the Rules Committee turned down his request for procedural help needed for him to offer the amendment on the floor.

The 17 environmental riders knocked out yesterday would have barred the EPA from using funds to enforce a raft of regulations affecting pesticides that could find their way into food, emissions from oil refineries and toxic waste incinerators, the runoff of storm water and sewage into rivers and lakes, and accident prevention plans in chemical plants.

"These riders end the life of the Clean Water Act, put numerous special interest loopholes in the Clean Air Act and block efforts to keep poisons out of our water," said Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), who led the effort with Boehlert to strip out the riders.

Rep. Charles Wilson (D-Tex.) said that voters last November were "not voting to get arsenic in their drinking water." But Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), point man in the GOP leadership for regulatory reform, likened the EPA to the Gestapo and said there was "a rebellion in the

streets of Houston" over EPA's auto emissions requirements.

While Republicans in the West, including California, voted almost solidly against striking out the riders, dozens of GOP members from the Northeast, Florida and Midwest states deserted. Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio), who backed Boehlert, said the vote reflected regional priorities rather than party affiliation. "We've had a long struggle getting the quality of the Great Lakes high enough to fish and swim," he said.

Among Republicans who broke ranks were at least four GOP committee and subcommittee chairmen.

The vote signified significant gains for environmentalists among Republicans since May 16, when the House passed amendments to the Clean Water Act relaxing many antipollution regulations. At that time, Boehlert was able to muster only 34 Republicans to oppose the legislation, which Democratic leaders called "a polluter's dream come true."

But environmentally minded members cautioned yesterday against euphoria. The bill on the floor still cuts EPA's budget by a third.

On Thursday, President Clinton signed a major spending bill that environmentalists contend will ravage the pristine forests of the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest by allowing wholesale logging of burned and dying trees.