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FOR CONTACT: DANIEL HIRSCH  
(831) 336-8003  
cell (831) 332-3099

## **BUSH ADMINISTRATION PUSHING TO WEAKEN RADIATION PROTECTIONS BEFORE LEAVING OFFICE**

### **Would Allow “Astronomical” Concentrations of Radioactivity in Drinking Water**

In a [letter to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen Johnson](#) today, sixty environmental and public health organizations expressed concern that EPA, “in the last weeks remaining in this Administration, is considering a series of actions aimed at dismantling and dramatically weakening decades of EPA policies for protection of the public from ionizing radiation.” The groups – including Physicians for Social Responsibility, Environment America, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Sierra Club, and the Nuclear Information & Resource Service - - criticized proposed revisions to EPA’s “Protective Action Guidance for Radiological Incidents” that would markedly relax protections of the public from radioactive releases from a wide variety of nuclear incidents, ranging from nuclear power plant accidents to transportation accidents involving radioactive materials.

[A study also released today](#), by the Committee to Bridge the Gap, compares the proposed new standards to existing ones, radionuclide by radionuclide, and concludes that the revisions would, among other things, allow radioactivity concentrations in drinking water hundreds to millions of times higher than longstanding EPA standards. The [confidential internal EPA draft guidance](#) was obtained by the trade publication *Inside EPA*.

In 2006, the Administration issued controversial guidance for cleaning up after a “dirty bomb.” A much-criticized new process called “optimization” was adopted that would allow long-term reoccupation of contaminated areas without any cleanup at doses as large as the equivalent of 50,000 chest X-rays. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that exposures that high would result in a cancer in every third person exposed, in excess of the cancers that would have occurred in the absence of such exposure. At the time, [organizations critical of the dirty bomb cleanup guidance](#) expressed concern that the Administration would subsequently attempt to expand its application to radiation releases from a range of events not involving terrorism. The new EPA guidance would do precisely that. It adopts the disturbing optimization approach, but goes even further, particularly in regard to allowing astronomical concentrations of radioactivity in drinking water.

The EPA proposal would permit drinking water to contain cesium-137, for example, at nearly 14,000 picocuries per liter (pCi/L) without taking protective action. For decades EPA has forbidden cesium-137 in drinking water at levels higher than 200 pCi/L. For strontium-90, the new standard would be nearly 7000 pCi/L; EPA’s longstanding Maximum Concentration Limit

(MCL) under the Safe Drinking Water Act is 8 pCi/L, nearly one thousand times lower. The limits for iodine-131 are relaxed by factors of approximately three thousand to one hundred-thousand compared with the existing MCL. Nickel-63 contamination would be allowed at 1,220,000 pCi/L compared to the longstanding EPA MCL of 50. When compared with EPA's existing guidance for emergencies, Removal Action Levels, the new standards would be approximately a hundred times to hundreds of thousands of times more lax.

Noting that the National Academy of Sciences, in a study funded by EPA, found radiation to be more dangerous than EPA and other agencies had presumed when previously setting standards, the groups said, "It is inexplicable that EPA would now, in the face of knowledge of the increased danger from radiation, dramatically relax rather than tighten radiation protections." The organizations also note that there is a major push to expand the use of nuclear power, and ask, "If it is so safe, why immensely increase the permissible exposures to the public?" They conclude by calling on EPA Administrator Johnson not to approve, in the brief time he remains in office, release of any new radiation standards or guidance that weaken radiation protection for the public.

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Copies of the letter to Administrator Johnson; the Bridge the Gap study comparing the proposed new standards against current EPA drinking water standards; the EPA internal confidential proposed revisions to its Protective Action Guidance; and the earlier correspondence about the dirty bomb guidance are at <http://www.committeetobridgethegap.org/radiation.html> or just click on the appropriate link in this email.