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Warming Is Major Threat To Humans, EPA Warns Advertisement

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Climate change will pose "substantial" threats to human health in the coming decades, the Environmental Protection Agency said yesterday -- issuing its warnings about heat waves, hurricanes and pathogens just days after the agency declined to regulate the pollutants blamed for warming.

In a new report, the [EPA](#) said "it is very likely" that more people will die during extremely hot periods in future years -- and that the elderly, the poor and those in inner cities will be most at risk.

Other possible dangers include more powerful hurricanes, shrinking supplies of fresh water in the West, and the increased spread of diseases contracted through food and water, the agency said.

The strong warnings highlighted the contorted position that the EPA has staked out on climate change. Last week, the agency decided not to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, at least not until after [President Bush](#)'s term ends.

A former EPA official told a House panel this week that senior administration officials and several Cabinet members supported regulating the emissions before the [White House](#) changed course and barred the EPA from concluding that they endanger public welfare.

In a closed interview Tuesday, former EPA deputy associate administrator Jason K. Burnett told the House [Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming](#) that Joel D. Kaplan, Bush's deputy chief of staff for policy, originally signed off on the decision to regulate emissions from both vehicles and stationary sources such as power plants and refineries. The decision came in response to a 2007 Supreme Court ruling that instructed the administration to determine whether carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases should be regulated under the Clean Air Act.

"There was a general belief that moving forward with a challenge and establishing a precedent in channeling regulation would serve the country better than leaving the challenge to the next administration," Burnett said in the interview, according to a transcript obtained by [The Washington Post](#). "The chief of staff's office then appears to have changed its mind."

[Rep. Edward J. Markey](#) (D-Mass.), who chairs the House panel, said in a statement: "Today typifies the climate-change schizophrenia in the Bush administration. On one hand, government scientists are saying that global warming poses grave threats to our health and our welfare, and, on the other hand, [there] are White House political hacks following the oil industry's bidding to do nothing."

The EPA report yesterday was less notable for its warnings -- similar problems have been predicted by other scientists and by the [U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) -- than for its source. The Bush administration has resisted the conclusion that increasing temperatures will harm human health, but in yesterday's report, that finding was unmistakable.

"We . . . anticipate substantial human health impacts," the document said.

In the West, it found, changing weather patterns could thin snowpack that feeds rivers, affecting hydroelectric dams and water supplies. In coastal areas, it could bring a sea-level rise that eats away at

dry land and storm surges that can wash it away in a flash.

In Washington and other Eastern cities, the report said, a warmer climate is likely to produce more bad-air days, because heat speeds up the process by which exhaust byproducts are cooked into smog. The report also found that rising temperatures are likely to mean more periods of sustained summer heat.

"It's going to be hotter, it's going to be hotter sooner in the year than it was in the past," said Kristie Ebi, an Alexandria-based consultant and one of the report's authors.

She said that young people living in the D.C. area now will notice a difference before they reach middle age. "They're going to look back and think back about how nice the summers used to be," she said. "Within 20, 30 years, on average, the [public] should notice that it's warmer."

The report was prepared under the EPA's leadership but released by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, which coordinates research among several federal agencies. Joel D. Scheraga of the EPA's Global Change Research Program said that there was no political interference in the report's findings or the timing of its release.

"The answer is unequivocally 'no,' " he said.

EPA spokesman [Jonathan Shradar](#) said there was no conflict between the warnings in the report and the agency's conclusion last week that regulation should be put off.

"Climate change is a serious problem that our nation needs to address. But we need to address it correctly," Shradar said.

Last Friday, the EPA announced that it would solicit comments on the idea of regulating greenhouse gases under the federal Clean Air Act. But at the same time it released a lengthy preamble, with messages from EPA Administrator [Stephen L. Johnson](#) and four other Cabinet members, saying that this idea was ill-advised.

Burnett said that this, too, was ordered by administration officials: "We were told . . . that the [document] should not establish a path forward or a framework for regulation, but should emphasize the complexity of the challenge."

He also told the panel that senior EPA officials met with representatives from [Exxon Mobil](#), the [American Petroleum Institute](#), and the National Petrochemicals and Refiners Association, who argued that Bush should not undermine his legacy by regulating greenhouse gases.

White House spokesman [Tony Fratto](#) said yesterday that the EPA administrator chose his course on his own.

"[Steve Johnson](#), as he has said repeatedly, and in sworn testimony, made his own decision," Fratto said. "And so whatever anyone's views were at that time are fairly irrelevant because the administrator chose to go a different route."

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