

With new bill, Simpson has EPA in his sights

By Nate Poppino - Times-News writer | Posted: Thursday, March 18, 2010

U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson has a bone to pick with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and he wants everyone to know it.

That's the message Simpson, R-Idaho, has sent over the past couple months about what he believes to be "the scariest agency in the federal government right now."

In press releases and committee meetings, he's railed against EPA actions regarding climate issues, water quality and, most importantly, the burden placed on small towns by tighter regulations on arsenic in drinking water. Towns such as Buhl and Castleford have had to borrow millions of dollars to cut their levels of the toxin to the 10-parts-per-billion standard approved in 2001 and formally adopted in 2006.

Those communities weren't in violation under the old standard of 50 ppb -- most measured less than 20 ppb, though Castleford reached as high as 22 ppb. And that's what's got Simpson so steamed up.

Earlier this month, Simpson and Rep. Mike Conaway, R-Texas, introduced for the third time a bill that would allow public water systems serving 10,000 people or less to apply to opt out of drinking-water regulations. The ranking member of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, Simpson also "vented" at EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson about the issue and her agency's power during a Feb. 25 budget hearing.

"Every one of these has turned into a 'what the hell is EPA doing' meeting," he said on a clip he posted on YouTube.

Certain aspects of the drinking-water bill, which Simpson first introduced two Congresses ago with then-Idaho Rep. C.L. "Butch" Otter, still need to be fleshed out, he told the Times-News. The initial bill doesn't include a definition for when the financial burden of meeting the federal mandate would be considered too high, nor does it state whether disturbingly high pollution levels would ever trump economic concerns.

But Simpson said he believes the legislation will find a more-welcome reception this year as communities in other parts of the country report more problems complying with the arsenic rules.

"Whether this is the exact answer or not, I don't know. But I do know we have a real problem out there," he said, adding he hopes the bill will be a starting point for debating the issue.

Of course, the legislation wouldn't rescue communities that have already taken on debt and built new treatment facilities. But it would help curb EPA power in the future, said Simpson, who is unhappy with the overall response he's gotten from agency administrators.

Simpson's press announcements and clips don't include the EPA officials' replies. But the responses have been disappointing, he said, and reinforce EPA's path as an unyielding regulatory agency. Its regional offices allegedly also don't apply rules the same way; in conversations with other members of Congress, he said, it's become clear that the most EPA complaints over the past decade have been about the region that includes Idaho.

"I don't get the idea that they are sympathetic to try to resolve any of these problems," Simpson said.