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Obama Plan to Revisit Existing Regulations Won't Dampen Industry's Push to Eliminate More Public Protections, Says CPR President Rena Steinzor

(Washington) - Rena Steinzor, President of the Center for Progressive Reform and Professor at the University of Maryland School of Law, issued the following statement today in response to President Obama's announcements on regulatory policy:

President Obama's claim that regulations need to be put in check has swallowed the GOP's frame for the debate hook, line, and sinker. In the last few decades we've implemented limited but successful protections that cleaned our air and water, with stunningly little burden to industry. That's the history of progress that needs to be remembered.

In the wake of the BP oil spill, the West Virginia mine disaster, and a salmonella outbreak, the President's concern should be that we need to strengthen our regulatory agencies further, not chastise them for being supposedly unfriendly to industry. The agencies tasked with protecting the public face a noxious mix of underfunding, political attacks, and lack of effective enforcement authority. The President should not undercut his own agency appointees who are working to protect the public.

The President specifically announced a regulatory "lookback" plan, requiring agencies to examine old regulations to see if any should be eliminated. Industry has long claimed that there are burdensome but useless regulations on the books, but has time and again failed to present a convincing case. The President's use of the saccharine example is not serious; industry has never presented evidence that the chemical's listing as a toxic chemical ever had significant costs.

Regulatory lookback is an idea that Republicans have pushed for years; now the President handed it to them with barely a sigh. At worst, regulatory lookback will be used to eliminate important regulations. At best, it will be a waste of agencies' time, sapping resources that are needed for the real work of protecting the public. Forcing agency staff to go on fishing expeditions would come with a real cost to the public health.

We do have a significant regulatory problem in the United States, but the White House has misidentified it. The real problem is the gaping holes in protections that persist because agencies lack the resources to develop regulations, and because industry has succeeded so thoroughly in slowing down the process through advocacy and litigation. Instead of accepting the industry's rhetorical framework and serving up a "lookback" process, the White House should be focusing on clearing the path for regulatory agencies to complete the important work that the nation's landmark bills protecting health, safety and the environment require of them.

Industry and its supporters have lobbied for decades to weaken health and safety protections, all for the purpose of improving their bottom line. The White House is mistaken if it thinks today's overture will soften industry's campaign.

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