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US environment chief draws fire on global warming

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By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Reuters) - The Bush administration's environment chief drew fire on Thursday from Democratic senators for delaying a decision on whether to let California regulate global warming emissions from cars and light trucks.

Stephen Johnson, head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, has said the government will decide this question by year's end, two years after California's first request to set state air quality standards stricter than national rules.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat who heads the Environment and Public Works Committee, told Johnson at a hearing she found the delay incomprehensible.

"I fail to understand why it should take the agency until December, a total of two years, to decide this waiver request. In 30 years, EPA has granted over 50 waiver requests and has never denied one. ... Deciding this issue should not take so long," Boxer said.

Sen. Frank Lautenberg, a New Jersey Democrat, accused Johnson of "foot-dragging," and added, "The environment cannot wait any longer."

California, the most populous U.S. state, has passed a law requiring that cars and light trucks cut climate-warming greenhouse gas emissions, primarily carbon dioxide, by 18 percent by 2020.

In December 2005, California asked EPA for permission -- known as a waiver -- to implement these state air quality requirements that are stricter than the national standard. If the waiver is granted, 12 other states that have passed similar requirements would be free to put those into practice, too.

In April, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the EPA has the power to regulate greenhouse gas emissions that spur global warming, ordering the agency to reconsider its refusal to regulate carbon dioxide and other emissions from new cars and trucks that contribute to climate change.

Since then, the environmental agency has called for public comment on the California matter, and is conducting a "rigorous analysis" of the more than 60,000 comments it received, Johnson said.

Boxer noted that some 54,000 of these comments were brief letters urging EPA to grant the waiver. Johnson countered that there were also hundreds of pages of technical data that had been submitted and that must be analyzed.

Boxer, a longtime environmentalist, has introduced legislation to require the agency to make a decision by September 30.

She also said at the hearing she was troubled by documents that indicate staff at the U.S. Transportation Department "lobbied members of Congress and governors" to oppose the waiver. A Transportation Department

spokesman confirmed these contacts had been made and said they were not unique.

To Boxer, these moves were "unprecedented, unprincipled use of taxpayer dollars to tilt the scales of another agency's decision-making process, even before public comments were considered."

Besides California, the 12 other states that have approved the higher greenhouse gas emission standards are: Connecticut, Florida, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.

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