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## EPA gnashes teeth over fluoride

WASHINGTON — William Reilly looks like the new white knight on the block fighting to reform his troubled kingdom, the Environmental Protection Agency. Now the workers in that kingdom want him to start with one of their biggest foes — fluoride.

Dedicated EPA staffers have tried for years to stop the EPA management from raising the maximum allowable levels of fluoride that cities can put in their drinking water. The official EPA line has been to allow fluoridation, which proponents say helps prevent tooth decay. But many of the rank-and-file employees think fluoride is dangerous, and they don't like being a part of any cavalier EPA policy.

In 1986, the EPA employees' union even tried to join in an environmental lawsuit against the EPA over the fluoride policy, but the judge refused to accept the union as a party to the suit, which was later thrown out of court.

Now, the union sees a possible new champion of its cause in Reilly, the first career environmentalist ever to head the EPA. The union recently wrote to Reilly asking him to stop the EPA's support for fluoride until better scientific studies are done on the health effects.

The fluoride issue has not had a minute of peace since 1945, when Grand Rapids, Mich., became the first city to fluoridate its drinking water. Fluoride has been called everything from the miracle cure for cavities to a communist plot. Today, 50

### Jack Anderson

percent of Americans have fluoride in their water, and there is still no national consensus about whether it's a good idea.

Shelves of studies have asked the question, does fluoride prevent tooth decay? The resounding answer is, maybe. An equal number of studies have asked the questions, does fluoride cripple the bones, discolor the teeth and cause birth defects and cancer? The resounding answer has been, who knows?

Nowhere is the debate more heated than within the ranks of the EPA. The agency sets maximum allowable fluoride limits for drinking water, and it is up to individual cities to decide if they want any fluoride at all. The EPA employees' union thinks that when the EPA set the standard at 4 parts per million, in 1986, volumes of troubling evidence were ignored.

For instance, the EPA decided the possibility of dental fluorosis — pitting and discoloration of teeth — was a cosmetic problem instead of a health hazard and therefore not a worry for the EPA. The union also took the EPA to task, claiming the agency ignored the potential for bone deterioration in people who get large doses of fluoride because they drink a lot of water.

The fluoride controversy is just one millstone around the

neck of an EPA workforce that has been demoralized by the pro-polluter policies of the Reagan administration.

The union has come to assume that the EPA will only react to environmental problems after the fact instead of trying to prevent them from happening.

Reilly has already given the employees reason to hope. He has gone on the offensive against polluters and brought a fresh tone of aggressiveness to the agency. But one of his toughest jobs may be to salvage the morale within the agency.

HEADS IN THE SAND — Politicians like to postpone unpleasant issues until the next person's term. For example, Congress and the Reagan administration ignored warnings that the savings and loan industry was in deep trouble, and now a massive bailout is needed.

The politicians have also ignored warnings that U.S. power-generating facilities could not keep up with future demand. But solutions were postponed. In some regions people are already beginning to suffer the consequences. They can expect brownouts this summer to conserve energy. Voltage reductions can be expected in the nation's capital and in the surrounding states of Maryland and Virginia. There are likely to be power shortages too in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and West Virginia.

Meanwhile, it will take years to finance and construct the new power plants that are needed today.

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