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EDITORIALS

EPA scientists who speak out need protection

The hierarchy at the Environmental Protection Agency doesn't take kindly to staff scientists who don't toe the party line.

Just ask David Lewis, a researcher at the agency's Exposure Research lab here in Athens.

A few days after a controversial guest column by Lewis was published in the *Athens Banner-Herald*, EPA officials marshaled their forces in an effort to punish Lewis and keep him silent.

Lewis' bosses filed a complaint charging him with violating the organization's code of ethics. His sin? He failed to properly list his credentials in an editor's note accompanying his article.

Officials claim that the note which preceded Lewis' column "mentions Mr. Lewis's EPA position in a manner that appears to emphasize this position (particularly in view of the fact that the article concerns EPA programs, policies, or activities) and does not provide 'several' other biographical details."

In their attempt to silence Lewis, the EPA bureaucrats failed to take into account that the editor's note was just that - an editor's note. It was written by the editorial page editor of these newspapers, and not by Lewis.

EPA regulations provide that a staffer can include his agency affiliation in "outside writing activities" as long as the affiliation "is given no more prominence than other significant biographical details."

Apparently, the EPA muck-a-mucks choose to see the way the editor's note was written as a serious offense and are now pondering what further action should be taken against Lewis.

In reality, the EPA's focusing on the editor's note is a sham. Lewis's real offense as far as the EPA is concerned is that he dared to call attention to the agency's heavy-handed actions and questioned the validity of a commonly used procedure to determine the safety of water supplies.

Lewis' commentary used an example in which he said the EPA had threatened to fine the Wilkes County town of Washington \$50,000 a day because water fleas didn't reproduce as rapidly in samples taken from the city's wastewater as they do in other water samples.

In addition to the *Banner-Herald* column critical of the EPA, Lewis is writing an article critical of the EPA's Inspector General office, arguing that it intimidates its own scientists.

Judging from the reaction to the column published in these newspapers, he has a point.

Lewis and his kind need to be protected from retribution by bosses who may be embarrassed by revelations of questionable procedures, punitive practices and imprudent policies.