

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Statement of Principles
Effect of State Audit Immunity/Privilege Laws
On Enforcement Authority for Federal Programs

TO: Regional Administrators

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Under federal law, states must have adequate authority to enforce the requirements of any federal programs they are authorized to administer. Some state audit immunity/privilege laws place restrictions on the ability of states to obtain penalties and injunctive relief for violations of federal program requirements, or to obtain information that may be needed to determine compliance status. This statement of principles reflects EPA's orientation to approving new state programs or program modifications in the face of state audit laws that restrict state enforcement and information gathering authority. While such state laws may raise questions about other federal program requirements, this statement is limited to the question of when enforcement and information gathering authority may be considered adequate for the purpose of approving or delegating programs in states with audit privilege or

immunity laws.

I. Audit Immunity Laws

Federal law and regulation requires states to have authority to obtain injunctive relief, and civil and criminal penalties for any violation of program requirements. In determining whether to authorize or approve a program or program modification in a state with an audit immunity law, EPA must consider whether the state's enforcement authority meets federal program requirements. To maintain such authority while at the same time providing incentives for self-policing in appropriate circumstances, states should rely on policies rather than enact statutory immunities for any violations. However, in determining whether these requirements are met in states with laws pertaining to voluntary auditing, EPA will be particularly concerned, among other factors, with whether the state has the ability to:

- 1) Obtain immediate and complete injunctive relief;
- 2) Recover civil penalties for:
 - i) significant economic benefit;
 - ii) repeat violations and violations of judicial or administrative orders;
 - iii) serious harm;
 - iv) activities that may present imminent & substantial endangerment.
- 3) Obtain criminal fines/sanctions for wilful and knowing violations of federal law, and in addition for violations that result from gross negligence under the Clean Water Act.

The presumption is that each of these authorities must be present at a minimum before the state's enforcement authority may be considered adequate. However, other factors in the statute may eliminate or so narrow the scope of penalty immunity to the point where EPA's concerns are met. For example:

- 1) The immunity provided by the statute may be limited to minor violations and contain other restrictions that sharply limit its applicability to federal programs.
- 2) The statute may include explicit provisions that make it inapplicable to federal programs.

II. Audit Privilege Laws

Adequate civil and criminal enforcement authority means that the state must have the ability to obtain information needed to identify noncompliance and criminal conduct. In determining whether to authorize or approve a program or program modification in a state with an audit privilege law, EPA expects the state to:

- 1) retain information gathering authority it is required to have under the specific requirements of regulations governing authorized or delegated programs;
- 2) avoid making the privilege applicable to criminal investigations, grand jury proceedings, and prosecutions, or exempted evidence of criminal conduct from the scope of privilege;
- 3) preserve the right of the public to obtain information about noncompliance, report violations and bring enforcement actions for violations of federal environmental law. For example, sanctions for whistleblowers or state laws that prevent citizens from obtaining information about noncompliance to which they are entitled under federal law appear to be inconsistent with this requirement.

III. Applicability of Principles

It is important for EPA to clearly communicate its position to states and to interpret the requirements for enforcement authority consistently. Accordingly, these principles will be applied in reviewing whether enforcement authority is adequate under the following programs:

- 1) National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES), Pretreatment and Wetlands programs under the Clean Water Act;
- 2) Public Water Supply Systems and Underground Injection Control programs under the Safe Drinking Water Act;
- 3) Hazardous Waste (Subtitle C) and Underground Storage Tank (Subtitle I) programs under the Resource Conservation Recovery Act;
- 4) Title V, New Source Performance Standards, National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants, and New Source Review Programs under the Clean Air Act.

These principles are subject to three important qualifications:

- 1) While these principles will be consistently applied in reviewing state enforcement authority under federal programs, state laws vary in their detail. It will be important to scrutinize the provisions of such statutes closely in determining whether enforcement authority is provided.

2) Many provisions of state law may be ambiguous, and it will generally be important to obtain an opinion from the state Attorney General regarding the meaning of the state law and the effect of the state's law on its enforcement authority as it is outlined in these principles. Depending on its conclusions, EPA may determine that the Attorney General's opinion is sufficient to establish that the state has the required enforcement authority.

3) These principles are broadly applicable to the requirements for penalty and information gathering authority for each of the programs cited above. To the extent that different or more specific requirements for enforcement authority may be found in federal law or regulations, EPA will take these into account in conducting its review of state programs. In addition, this memorandum does not address other issues that could be raised by state audit laws, such as the scope of public participation or the availability to the public of information within the state's possession.

IV. Next Steps

Regional offices should, in consultation with OECA and national program offices, develop a state-by-state plan to work with states to remedy any problems identified pursuant to application of these principles. As a first step, regions should contact state attorneys general for an opinion regarding the effect of any audit privilege or immunity law on enforcement authority as discussed in these principles.