

y. His column will resume when he returns.

Contested Proposal On Safety Proceeds

The Labor Department is proceeding with a contested rule that would require the government to take extra steps before setting workplace safety standards for 147 million American workers.

The White House Office of Management and Budget published the proposed rule on its Web site yesterday. It remains similar to the draft that caused an uproar from labor unions, Democrats and public health groups when the Labor Department quietly submitted it in early July. They complain that the administration is pursuing an eleventh-hour rule change that would make it more difficult for Labor to protect workers from on-the-job injuries and death.

Leon Sequeira, assistant secretary of labor, said yesterday that the aim of the rule is to seek additional public comment and notice on workplace risk assessments so the agency can be sure it is "casting a wide net for the best available data." He called any assertions that the agency sought to slow the creation of safety standards "flat-out false."

But critics note the administration has set only one major health standard for a workplace chemical and one revision of a safety standard in eight years, both under pressure of lawsuits. Democrats in Congress and the American Public Health Association have urged Secretary Elaine L. Chao to withdraw the rule.

"Here they are trying to put in more hurdles for setting workplace safety standards for the next administration, when they haven't done anything in eight years to protect workers," said Peg Seminario, safety and health director for the AFL-CIO. "Happy Labor Day from the Bush administration."

— Carol D. Leonnig