

Politics marks Obama, GOP battle over regulations

By ALAN FRAM

WASHINGTON

Republicans launching their assault on environmental, health and other federal regulations want the White House to explain what President Barack Obama means when he says that he also wants to erase rules that hurt businesses and cost jobs.

In tune with their theme of whittling big government down to size, a GOP-run House panel Wednesday was going to question Cass Sunstein, who heads the White House office that reviews regulations. The hearing is likely to show that while both sides voice a goal of eliminating harmful or needless red tape, their clashing views may produce little more than political fireworks.

With a sympathetic ear to corporate America, Republicans are talking about fighting existing and proposed regulations that Obama and congressional Democrats prize, including limits on greenhouse gas emissions and rules to enforce last year's financial and health care overhauls.

In one of several recent business-friendly moves, Obama issued an executive order last week ordering agencies to use the "least burdensome tools" when issuing regulations and to eliminate "outmoded, ineffective, insufficient or excessively burdensome" ones.

But the examples the administration has cited are far narrower than the GOP's targets.

"A lot of what each party may want to go after is supported by some set of the public," said Peter Van Doren, editor of Regulation magazine, published by the Cato Institute, which favors limiting government's reach. He predicted numerous partisan clashes, "and in 2012 we'll have the election and see what happens."

Sunstein was testifying to the House Energy and Commerce oversight and investigations subcommittee, headed by Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla. Stearns said recently that he doubts Obama and the GOP want to examine the same rules.

"Instead of him talking about it, why doesn't he just go to his federal agencies and stop them cold?" Stearns said.

Since Obama controls federal agencies and Democrats run the Senate, it will be tough for Republicans to force the administration to drop regulations the president likes. Either way, participants agree, the duel will have a distinct political flavor, with the GOP pushing for

business interests' goals and Obama protecting Democratic constituencies like labor and environmental groups while also showing concern about stifling jobs.

"Clearly this White House is starting to think about 2012," when Obama faces re-election, said Gary Bass, executive director of OMB Watch, which monitors the regulatory process.

In one sign of the administration's changed sensibilities, it bowed to industry pressure Tuesday and delayed a proposal to require companies to keep separate records on workplace musculoskeletal injuries.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., who chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, has asked about 150 companies and trade groups for suggestions on which regulations to eliminate. He has yet to release any responses, but letters obtained by The Associated Press give a taste for the rules that business dislikes and Republicans might battle:

--The Associated Builders and Contractors, representing the construction industry, has complained about Obama administration policies and rules pressuring contractors to use union workers, eliminate workplace hazards and limit lead exposure.

--The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, representing a dozen carmakers, favors a single national fuel economy standard over conflicting state requirements. The group is also unhappy about forthcoming rules on ethanol, fuel economy labeling and visibility out the rear of vehicles.

--The National Association of Manufacturers cites a study claiming that regulations contribute to an 18 percent cost disadvantage U.S. companies face against other major countries. They say curbs on greenhouse gases, emissions from boilers and ozone pollution combined with other rules "could cost millions of jobs and weaken an economy in a still fragile recovery."

The government issues 3,000 or more regulations a year, though most are minor, according to data compiled by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress. Ever since President Bill Clinton issued an executive order similar to Obama's, agencies have been required to evaluate their rules, but few are killed.

In a speech in November, U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Thomas Donahue said regulations cost Americans \$1.75 trillion a year. Though he said many are necessary, he complained about a "regulatory tsunami" that is the country's "single biggest threat to job creation."

Democrats and their supporters say such claims are extreme and unfounded, underscoring the gulf between the two sides.

"Implementation of environment and health laws don't actually impose a big burden on the economy," said David Doniger, climate policy director of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It's an unproved big lie."