EPA Official Apologizes for Use of the Word 'Crucify'

RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI,Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A top administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has apologized for using the word "crucify" two years ago when describing the agency's enforcement policies, and for saying it makes examples of bad players in the oil and gas industry.

EPA Region 6 administrator Al Armendariz, who oversees Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and New Mexico, issued a written apology Wednesday after video surfaced of him at a meeting in May 2010 in the tiny town of Dish.

The video shows Armendariz answering a question about the agency's enforcement policies. In the Middle Ages, he tells the crowd, the Romans would enter a troublesome village, "take the first five guys they saw and crucify them." Then the town would be "really easy to manage for the next few years," he said.

The EPA also makes "examples of people who are not complying with the law, you make examples out of them, use it as a deterrent method," Armendariz continued. "Companies that are smart see that and they don't want to play that, and they decide at that point that it's time to clean up."

To some Republicans and conservatives, the comments justified their long-standing allegation that the EPA under President Barack Obama has stepped up enforcement to a point where it is harming the economy and the energy industry. The EPA also has become a popular target on the campaign trail, and Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney has in the past called for EPA chief Lisa P. Jackson to be fired.

Armendariz's apology was issued Wednesday by the EPA's headquarters in Washington.

"I apologize to those I have offended and regret my poor choice of words. It was an offensive and inaccurate way to portray our efforts to address potential violations of our nation's environmental laws," he said. "I am always and have been committed to fair and vigorous enforcement of those laws."

Cynthia Giles, the assistant administrator for enforcement and compliance assurance, also issued a statement.

"Strong, fair and effective enforcement of the environmental laws passed by Congress is critical to protecting public health and ensuring that all companies, regardless of industry, are playing by the same rules," she wrote.

Dish is a town north of Dallas where residents' concerns over the environmental impacts of a new method of gas drilling helped put the issue on the national stage.

Testing showed some groundwater contamination and elevated toxic air pollution after operators began using a new method — a combination of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, and horizontal drilling — to extract once out-of-reach natural gas from impermeable layers of the Barnett shale.

The EPA helped test the town's water and air, and the drillers changed some methods. Armendariz traveled to the town of 200 people to talk to residents.

On Thursday, at the White House press briefing, press secretary Jay Carney was asked whether Armendariz's comments proved that the EPA's enforcement practices were unfair, such as in Pennsylvania, where testing has shown that allegations of groundwater contamination caused by fracking are false.

Carney denied that. He said Armendariz's comments were "inaccurate as a representation of, or characterization of the way that the EPA has operated under President Obama."

Oil and gas production on federal lands and waters have increased since Obama took office, he said.

Later Thursday, Republican Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott issued a statement saying the administration was "more worried about aggressively advancing its radical agenda (than) fostering job growth and expanding our economy."

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Associated Press writers Dina Cappiello and Anne Gearan contributed to this report from Washington.

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