

CALL TO HALT FEDERAL FINANCIAL DISCLOSURES

Congress should “indefinitely suspend” requirements for the online posting of personal financial information for 28,000 senior members of the executive branch, including military officers and government scientists, a federal advisory group says. The requirements are the result of provisions in the Stock Act, which was enacted last year to address concerns that members of Congress are exempt from insider trading laws. Under the law, high-ranking federal employees must disclose in an online database their financial information. Critics have complained that a searchable, online database is an invasion of privacy and would subject federal workers to an increased risk of identity theft. In a report mandated by Congress, the nonpartisan National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) concludes that posting personal financial information “does indeed impose unwarranted risk to national security and law enforcement, as well as threaten agency missions, individual safety, and privacy.” Congress has delayed the deadline three times, but the Internet posting requirements are now due to begin on April 15. Sen. Thomas R. Carper (D-Del.), chair of the homeland security committee, says he will give NAPA’s findings “very serious consideration” as his committee determines the appropriate next steps.—GH

SAFETY BOARD HAS OFFSHORE AUTHORITY

The Chemical Safety & Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) has authority to investigate offshore oil and gas drilling and production accidents under a decision reached by a federal district court judge on March 30. CSB’s offshore jurisdiction was challenged by Transocean Deepwater Drilling Co. when CSB issued five subpoenas to obtain information from the company during its investigation of the BP Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico. Transocean, the rig owner and operator, claimed the board lacked author-

A judge says CSB has clear authority to investigate offshore chemical accidents.



U.S. COAST GUARD

CLEANER FUEL PROPOSED BY EPA

Sulfur content in vehicle fuel would be reduced by more than 60% under a proposal EPA announced on March 29. The sulfur reduction in gasoline would be phased in between 2017 and 2025 and would cost refineries just 1 cent per gal, according to EPA. The lower sulfur content will allow emission-control catalyst technologies to work more efficiently, enabling automakers to meet new tailpipe emissions reduction standards also proposed by EPA, according to an agency fact sheet. EPA stressed the sulfur reduction is a key part of an integrated system to lower overall vehicle pollution, including particulates, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds. It will also align national vehicle standards with those of California. The agency estimates that the proposed tailpipe standards, including the sulfur reductions, when fully implemented will annually prevent 23,000 cases of respiratory ailments in children and up to 2,400 premature deaths. Automakers support the sulfur requirement, but the oil industry says the regulations are unnecessary and will raise gasoline prices by 9 cents per gal.—JJ

ity to investigate the April 2010 accident. But U.S. District Judge Lee H. Rosenthal disagreed, saying CSB has such authority. Although CSB issued a draft report on the accident last summer, the board will now assess material gathered through the subpoenas, CSB says. The new material includes records from Transocean’s internal accident investigation as well as company information denied to CSB but supplied to a host of federal agencies investigating the accident. Transocean is considering whether to appeal the decision and would not comment.—JJ

U.S. RULES STIFLE RARE-EARTH MINING

Mining permits and safety regulations unnecessarily limit access to large U.S. stores of rare-earth minerals, according to a new report from the National Center for Policy Analysis, a nonpartisan think tank. Getting approval in the U.S. for a rare-earth minerals mine takes an average of seven years because of delays at both the federal and state levels. The U.S.’s wait time is among the longest in the world, says the report, “Rare Earth Mining Potential in the States.” In the meantime, U.S. industries and the federal government get most of their rare-earth minerals from abroad, primarily from China. The report

suggests the U.S. streamline its processes and cites both Australia and Canada as countries with similar environmental regulations but where mines can be permitted on average within two years. “The U.S. needs to combine redundant and multiple agencies into a single ‘one-stop-shopping’ authority,” says study author Tom Tanton, an adjunct fellow at the center.—AW

DEMOCRATS SEEK ACTION ON TRADE-SECRET THEFT

The top two Democrats on the House of Representatives Ways & Means Committee are urging the White House to formally target China for the theft of U.S. trade secrets. Designating China as a “priority foreign country” under the Trade Act of 1974 could lead to punitive duties on Chinese goods if U.S. concerns are not addressed, Reps. Sander M. Levin (D-Mich.) and Charles B. Rangel (D-N.Y.) say in a letter to Acting U.S. Trade Representative Demetrios J. Marantis. “It looks very much as though the Chinese government is stealing our companies’ trade secrets and passing them along to their [state-owned enterprises], and possibly other Chinese companies,” they write. The White House unveiled a new strategy on Feb. 20 for tackling trade-secret theft that includes greater use of existing U.S. trade tools, such as imposing sanctions on nations that threaten U.S. intellectual property. A report outlining the plan lists more than a dozen cases—including some involving Dow and DuPont—of trade-secret theft by Chinese companies or individuals.—GH