

FEDERAL REPORT

Helms takes aim at pro-gay programs

By Ruth Larson
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Sen. Jesse Helms, North Carolina Republican, will introduce legislation to eliminate federal agency programs that he says condone or promote homosexual lifestyles.

Another bill would protect the First Amendment right of government employees to criticize government "diversity" programs.

Mr. Helms has been a severe critic of the administration's diversity policies, particularly those relating to sexual orientation.

"I wish this legislation was not necessary," Mr. Helms said in his floor statement. "But it is. The Clinton administration has conducted a concerted effort to give homosexual rights, privileges and protections throughout the federal agencies — to extend to homosexuals special rights in the federal workplace, rights not accorded to most other groups and individuals. No other group in America is given special rights based on their sexual preference."

He criticized agency programs aimed at "persuading — indeed, intimidating — federal employees to accept homosexuality as a legitimate and normal lifestyle."

Homosexual groups were angered by Mr. Helms. "This is the first indication that Jesse Helms intends to use his newly acquired power, in Congress to pursue his anti-gay obsession," said Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the

Human Rights Campaign Fund. Daniel Zingale, the group's public policy director, said, "This legislation would promote hate speech and discrimination against federal workers."

Mr. Helms has introduced two bills. One would prohibit agencies from spending appropriated funds on programs that "compel, instruct, encourage, urge, or persuade employees or officials to recruit — on the basis of sexual orientation — homosexuals for employment with the government, or embrace, accept, condone, or celebrate homosexuality."

The other bill would prohibit removing employees who criticize the government's policies on homosexuals without first giving them a public hearing.

The bills grew out of last year's battle over the removal of Karl Mertz, an Agriculture Department employee who, while on personal leave, criticized the administration's policies on homosexuals.

Mr. Helms held up confirmation of five administration nominees and threatened to delay the Agriculture appropriations bill until Secretary Mike Espy eventually agreed to reinstate the employee in October.

Mr. Mertz is awaiting the outcome of an Office of Special Counsel investigation before deciding whether to file suit against Mr. Espy for violating his First Amendment rights.

About 22 federal agencies have GLOBE (Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual

Employees) groups. One Department of Transportation GLOBE official, who declined to be named, said the legislation would have minimal impact on GLOBE groups because they are already prohibited from receiving agency funding.

Nevertheless, such officially sanctioned groups are allowed the use of computer mail, telephone voice mail and bulletin boards to publicize their events.

The GLOBE official called Mr. Helms' legislation "blatantly discriminatory" and said, "The message it sends is 'It's open season on gays and lesbians.'"

Mr. Helms cited several examples of objectionable activities. For example, in September, the Navy hosted a Diversity Day for its military and civilian employees. Costs associated with the event included the leased office space, salaries for hundreds of employees, speakers' fees and transportation, he said.

He also criticized the Agriculture Department and other government agencies for officially sanctioning GLOBE organizations, but he added: "The Department of Agriculture went further when they created a 'gay, lesbian and bisexual program manager' position within the Foreign Agriculture Service."

That position involves "promoting the gay, lesbian and bisexual employment program" and "assisting in the recruitment" of homosexuals.