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WHITE HOUSE:

Staffers on deck for Obama's 2015 executive push

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Published: Tuesday, December 2, 2014

First in a series on energy and environment staffers worth watching in 2015.

With Republicans poised to tighten their grip on the legislative branch, look for the White House to plow ahead with efforts to end-run Congress on energy and climate change policies.

The White House will continue to advance President Obama's climate plans by tasking agencies with curbing domestic greenhouse gas emissions, investing in renewable energy technologies and seeking international agreements to combat global warming.

The administration is also making a big push to get major energy and environment rules finalized before Obama's term ends, ranging from a new national standard for smog-forming ozone and a contentious overhaul of Clean Water Act protections for wetlands and waterways to tougher crude-by-rail safety standards.

As Obama looks to burnish his environmental legacy during his last two years in office, he's counting on a cadre of top staffers to lead the charge behind the scenes at the White House.

Here's a look at several key aides who will be working on the administration's energy and environmental agenda at the White House next year (and one whose departure will likely have a big impact):

John Podesta, counselor to the president

Obama's green guru, Podesta has made environmental issues central to his job since arriving at the White House early this year. Podesta has been central to an array of energy and climate policies rolled out by the White House in 2014, including the release of the National Climate Assessment in May and a landmark agreement between the United States and China to slash their greenhouse gas emissions.

But he's on his way out.

Podesta only signed up for a yearlong stint at the White House, and he has indicated he might stay only through Obama's State of the Union address. His departure could make greens nervous about losing a champion who's close to Obama. Podesta's arrival was a relief to some environmentalists who feared a string of high-profile departures in 2013 left them without a strong advocate in the White House.

However, Podesta's work is likely to outlast him as the administration carries out plans he helped set in motion, and he's likely to remain a key policy player on the national stage. The former Clinton White House chief of staff is widely rumored to be in the running for a top job in Hillary Clinton's potential 2016 White House campaign.

"We all understood that Podesta was signing on for just a year," Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign, said in an email. "Of course we've been delighted to have benefited from John Podesta's great work, and we'll miss him. But his and the other White House staff's boss (Barack Obama) has made global warming a high priority. So I think the climate is in good hands."

Dan Utech, special assistant to the president for energy and climate change, and Mike Boots, acting chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality

With Podesta's departure, Utech and Boots will become the go-to guys on energy and climate issues in the White House.

They're low-key staffers who have risen in the ranks as more senior players have left the administration.

Utech is the third person to serve as Obama's energy and climate "czar," after Carol Browner and then her successor, Heather Zichal, left the post. He's been on Obama's energy staff since 2010, when he first joined the White House energy and climate change policy shop. He previously worked at the Energy Department under former Secretary Steven Chu and as a senior energy and environmental aide to then-Sen. Clinton (D-N.Y.).

Boots has been at the helm of CEQ since his predecessor, Nancy Sutley, and her former deputy Gary Guzy left. The White House hasn't announced a replacement for Sutley, who departed in February, and with prospects for Obama nominees looking increasingly grim since the GOP won the Senate majority, the administration may rely on Boots to stick around until the end of the president's term. Formerly Sutley's chief of staff, Boots was also CEQ's associate director for land and water, and vice president for sustainable markets at SeaWeb, an ocean advocacy group.

Rick Duke, associate director for energy and climate change and deputy director for climate policy

Duke is a top climate change official in Utech's and Boots' offices. He joined Utech's shop early this year, where he was tasked with focusing on mitigation measures laid out in Obama's Climate Action Plan and the intersection of domestic and international climate change actions.

He's been CEQ's associate director for energy and climate change since 2012. Prior to that, he worked at DOE as deputy assistant secretary for climate policy and as director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Center for Market Innovation.

Duke also worked at the management consulting firm McKinsey & Co. and as manager of the Honduras office of Soluz Inc., a renewable energy company that focuses on developing countries. He has a doctorate in public affairs from Princeton University and an economics degree from Brown University, according to his LinkedIn profile.

Rohan Patel, special assistant to the president and deputy director for intergovernmental affairs

Patel was promoted early this year to his post in the intergovernmental affairs shop led by Obama confidante Valerie Jarrett. He's a White House liaison to local elected officials, and sources say he's remained an important player when it comes to doing environmental policy outreach for the administration.

Patel was previously CEQ's associate director for public engagement, where he worked on climate change and conservation issues, according to the White House. He joined the Obama administration in 2009, where he worked for several years at the Agriculture Department and was a senior policy adviser for Secretary Tom Vilsack.

He's a native of Goshen, Ind., and a graduate of Northwestern University.

Drew McConville, CEQ senior adviser for policy and strategic planning

McConville is one of Boots' top advisers, who's racked up years of experience working on energy and climate issues in the Obama White House. He was previously CEQ's deputy associate director for energy and climate and a policy analyst in the White House office of energy and climate change.

He also did a stint as a presidential management fellow at U.S. EPA. He was a special assistant to then-air chief Gina McCarthy, prepping her for meetings and working on projects related to energy efficiency and climate and energy outreach, according to EPA's website.

McConville received a master's degree in environmental management from Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment and a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College. He credits his time in the Granite State with much of his love for both the outdoors and Ultimate Frisbee.

Lowry Crook, CEQ deputy chief of staff

Like other CEQ staffers, Crook has taken on additional duties since the agency's top brass left the office. He's been CEQ's deputy chief of staff since 2012 and has been playing backup for Boots since he took the helm of the environmental shop.

Crook joined CEQ after spending several years as chief of staff at the Federal Maritime Commission and nearly a decade as counsel at the WilmerHale law firm, according to his LinkedIn profile. He's got a law degree from the University of Texas.

Jessica Maher, special assistant to the president and Senate legislative affairs liaison

Maher works out of the White House shop that's responsible for advancing Obama's agenda in Congress, and sources say environmental issues have remained central to her portfolio. The White House Office of Legislative Affairs serves as lawmakers' primary point of contact with the administration.

From 2009 until 2011, Maher was CEQ's associate director for legislative affairs. She joined the administration after working for several liberal lawmakers. She was a senior policy adviser to Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and a legislative assistant to former Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Russ Feingold.

Maher received a master's degree in environmental management from Duke University's Nicholas School and a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, according to her LinkedIn profile.

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