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WHITE HOUSE:

Filling Podesta's void

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The looming departure of President Obama's front man on climate issues is sparking speculation in energy circles.

The question on their minds: What will happen to energy and climate issues in a post-John Podesta White House?

"I think there's a lot of anxiety, I think there's a lot of questions," said Eric Washburn, an energy industry lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani. "We know these issues are going to be coming up again and again, and no one knows quite how this White House system is going to work in the next two years."

Podesta is slated to leave his post as Obama's counselor in February, a White House spokesman confirmed yesterday. The departure isn't a surprise; the former Clinton White House chief of

staff signed on for a yearlong stint when he joined the Obama administration early last year, and he's rumored to be in the running for a top job in Hillary Clinton's potential 2016 White House campaign.

He's been a major force on energy and climate issues since setting up shop in the West Wing last year. He's helped oversee everything from the administration's ambitious rules to curb power plant emissions to a landmark agreement between the United States and China to slash heat-trapping gases.

Greens have viewed him as a reliable ally with the clout to ensure that environmental issues remained central to the president's agenda and as someone who could lead the defensive efforts to protect new energy and environmental policies from nearly constant attacks from Capitol Hill. Podesta's White House arrival came after the departure of several top energy aides left some outsiders wondering who would take the reins on Obama's second-term climate change agenda

It's unclear whether the White House will appoint a new official to assume Podesta's portfolio on energy and climate issues. Some outsiders are predicting that the administration will hire a new top aide, but a replacement may not have the same environmental policy focus. Ron Klain, former White House "Ebola czar" who worked as chief of staff to then-Vice President Al Gore, has been rumored to be a possible Podesta successor.

"John Podesta has provided critical leadership on a host of energy and the environmental issues, and ... there's speculation that the White House would bring in someone else to perform a similar senior leadership role," said David Gardiner, an environmental strategist who directed the White House Climate Change Task Force under President Clinton.

David Hayes, who was deputy Interior secretary in the Obama and Clinton administrations, said he's hoping the administration will continue to pay a high level of attention to the issues Podesta has been dealing with.

"Particularly on the energy and environmental issues, I certainly am hoping that someone with his type of access and with the trust and confidence of the president and the senior staff will be available to continue to press forward on the agenda," Hayes said.

"I'm also aware of the reality that there's only one John Podesta," he added. "It's not going to be the same and may be almost, by definition, suboptimal." Hayes recently signed on as a visiting senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank founded by Podesta.

If a new heavy hitter isn't brought in to take on Podesta's energy portfolio, those responsibilities are expected to fall squarely on the shoulders of White House energy and climate "czar" Dan Utech and Mike Boots, the acting chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality.

Utech and Boots are widely viewed as trusted advisers who are capable and savvy on the issues, but who won't have the same level of access to the president that Podesta has.

"Those guys are very, very smart, and they know the issues well, so that's a great starting point for handling these issues going forward," said Washburn of Bracewell & Giuliani. He said Utech and Boots are "quite accessible. All of us who work on these issues will continue to have opportunities to meet and present our case."

But as critics continue to assail the administration's environmental policies and a newly emboldened Senate GOP majority prepares to wage war against new White House rules, "The question is, how strong is the connection between those guys and the folks in the highest ranks of the White House making decisions about where they want to spend their political capital?" Washburn added.

Some outsiders are confident that Podesta has already set up a framework to guide the administration through the remainder of Obama's term.

"I don't think his leaving is going to have much of an impact," said Brian Wolff, executive vice president for public policy and external affairs at the Edison Electric Institute. In what he called a "quintessential" Podesta move, "He sort of put everything on the path already," when it comes to climate change. "I think that with Dan Utech and Mike Boots and that team over there, really it's just about now executing."

Hayes said Podesta's work with Utech and Boots has "really created a special sauce that has facilitated this initiative going forward. ... I hope that there's another combination with much of the same ingredients ... to continue the good work."

Ultimately, prioritizing energy and environmental issues will come down to Obama, said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign.

"Believing that the president gets it and really wants to get it right makes me more relaxed about how he goes about choosing staff to do that," Becker said.

"If the president wants to do it, it'll get done."

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