

Utility Infielder

SCOTT MARTELLE JUNE 5, 2011

On Obama's Commerce Department pick, business and environmentalists both say meh.

There are a few ways to read President Barack Obama's decision to nominate John E. Bryson, the environmentalist-turned-corporate CEO, as his next secretary of commerce. The obvious one is that Obama wanted to find a Democratic Commerce secretary whom Republicans would perceive as, well, friendly to commerce. And given the **warm reception** by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, Obama seems to have found his nominee.

But environmentalists - often at odds with business and industry leaders - mostly like Bryson, too, in a "he's not as bad as the others" kind of way. Bryson helped create the Natural Resources Defense Council in 1970, which **has made** him a target for some Republican lawmakers, including Rep. Darrell Issa of California and Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma. And, during his 18 years as CEO, Bryson tried to steer the massive Edison International power company in a greener direction.

"If you're going to choose a utility executive for a cabinet job, John Bryson is the one to pick," says Dan Becker of the Safe Climate Campaign. "But he was still a utility executive. He certainly understands environmental issues and, at times, led So Cal Edison to make sound decisions on energy efficiency, pointing to their economic benefits to the company. But when the economy got sour, he was also willing to abandon those decisions."

As Edison's CEO, Becker says, Bryson offered "unrelenting support for polluting the heck out of Arizonans and others downwind with the Mojave Power Plant (in Laughlin, Nevada). This was one of the most polluting power plants in the country until forced to close by environmental pressure."

But that's what utility CEOs do, says Carl Pope, chairman of the Sierra Club.

"The reality of running a utility like Edison is you've got a business model that really gets in the way of getting your customers to use less of your product," he says. "John did good job, but he wasn't working at NRDC any more, so he behaved like an enlightened utility director. But he wasn't crazy green."

Since leaving Edison three years ago when he reached age 65, Bryson has stepped in as chairman of BrightSource Energy Inc., whose planned massive solar array in the Mojave Desert has been sidetracked by the discovery that it's building in the habitat of "vulnerable" desert tortoises - a conflict that **highlights** the crisscrossing stresses among environmentalists and wildlife advocates.

It's unclear, though, how much sway Bryson's environmental roots still hold over him. He sits on the boards of The Boeing Co. (which **has had** some environmental issues) and the Walt Disney Co. (**ditto** and **ditto**), and since leaving Edison has served a murky role as a senior advisor to KKR, the massive equity management fund, which likely will lead to some questions in the nomination hearings. As might his role in the 1990s as an Edison subsidiary built the Paiton I coal-fired power plant in Indonesia, when just about every business deal **seemed to add** a little lining to the Suharto family's pockets.

Bryson's role in the California energy crisis a decade ago will get a scouring, too, as will his departure. Bryson has been credited with navigating the utility through its near-bankruptcy during the crisis that grew from the state's move to partial utility deregulation in the late 1990s. But his \$65 million in pension and stock options when he retired angered consumer advocates.

"Ultimately their customers, not their shareholders or their executives, paid for the mistake" from deregulation, says Mindy Spatt, communications director for The Utility Reform Network, a San Francisco watchdog group. "Bryson's tenure was marked by high rates and overspending, and his obscenely large retirement package remains a burden on ratepayers."

How rocky a road these issues might make for Bryson's confirmation is uncertain. His biggest problem might be something he had no hand in. Even before Bryson's

nomination was announced, Republican legislative leaders had warned the White House they would block any new nomination at Commerce that wasn't preceded by free-trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea, which **have been hung up** over related job retraining programs for displaced American workers.

Pope wonders if Obama's selection of Bryson might ultimately be a signal that he's finally getting around to a serious push on American industry to find greener sources of power - and maybe create a few jobs along the way.

"Hopefully, this is a sign that the White House has not forgotten that they're not going to win the election on the deficit, they're going to win the election on jobs," Pope says, adding that moving to green power sources both cuts climate-changing emissions and produces new jobs in new technology fields. "I think it's a hopeful sign but I don't know what's behind the agenda.... What's really important is what the brief the president is giving to him - 'This is what I want you to get done for me.'"



