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What happens if Pruitt leaves?

By: Robin Bravender

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Rumors swirled yesterday that President Trump might oust Attorney General Jeff Sessions and replace him with U.S. EPA boss Scott Pruitt.

If it happens, it stands to be among the president's most consequential moves on environmental policy. Pruitt, the former Oklahoma attorney general, is reviled by environmentalists and Democrats for moving swiftly to pare down EPA and roll back major rules dealing with everything from climate change and water to toxic chemicals. His tenure at EPA so far — just over one year — has also won him plaudits from conservatives and industry representatives who accused the Obama administration of vast overreach.

Pruitt's possible jump to the Justice Department would leave a vacant slot at the helm of the nation's top environmental agency at a time when other top administration jobs are in flux. Trump's broad deregulatory push would likely continue at EPA and elsewhere, but the agency's leadership and priorities could see big shifts if a new leader is confirmed or if Pruitt's position goes unfilled amid opposition in the Senate.

After Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Tuesday, accounts surfaced that he is considering broader shake-ups in his Cabinet. Vanity Fair reported yesterday that Trump could replace Sessions with Pruitt. Sessions has recused himself from the DOJ probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, but Pruitt presumably wouldn't do so.

Pruitt would need to be confirmed to lead the Justice Department. So would a possible successor at EPA. Both of those confirmation battles promise to be epic. Senate Democrats have expressed frequent frustration with Pruitt for his environmental policies, transparency, and his use of taxpayer money for things like pricey travel and a soundproof phone booth. Any EPA nominee would be immediately at the center of a bitter partisan battle in a midterm election year.

EPA referred questions to the White House, which did not respond to a request for comment. Environmentalists who have excoriated Pruitt for his rule rollbacks, expensive travel and efforts to downsize EPA would be thrilled to see him go.

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Pruitt's supporters, meanwhile, have been happy with his moves toward repealing the Clean Power Plan and reviewing or cutting other major Obama-era environmental regulations. Pruitt recently issued a report summarizing his first year in office and lauding his often-stated efforts to focus on EPA's "core mission."

It's unclear who might take the helm at EPA if Pruitt goes to a different agency. Trump's pick to become Pruitt's deputy, former coal industry lobbyist Andrew Wheeler, was nominated last October but hasn't yet cleared the Senate.

Names circulating as possible replacements for Pruitt include EPA air chief Bill Wehrum; Donald van der Vaart, the former top environmental regulator in North Carolina; Bryan Shaw, chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality; and Craig Butler, head of the Ohio EPA.

There's a chance that West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, who's running in the Republican primary in the race against Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), could be a contender for the EPA slot if he loses the May 8 primary. He's in a competitive race against Rep. Evan Jenkins and coal magnate Don Blankenship. Morrisey and Pruitt were among the state attorneys general who led the charge against the Clean Power Plan in court.