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Biden’s Deep Climate Bench Prompts Questions Over White House Role

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President-elect Joe Biden's appointment of several officials with significant climate change experience is prompting questions about how he will divide responsibility among the team, with many observers suggesting incoming White House domestic climate policy "czar" Gina McCarthy will assume a leadership role.

Multiple sources expect McCarthy to take that position in part because she shepherded multiple major climate rules as EPA chief during the second term of the Obama administration.

However, EPA will likely be tasked with issuing key greenhouse gas standards under the Biden administration, and those rules would be developed and signed by Administrator-designate Michael Regan, who currently serves as North Carolina's environment secretary.

In addition to McCarthy and Regan, Biden named former Secretary of State John Kerry as a special international climate envoy, Southern Environmental Law Center Director of Regulatory Policy Brenda Mallory to head the White House Council on Environmental Quality, Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM) to lead the Department of the Interior and former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm (D) to run the Department of Energy (DOE).

Biden [introduced the team Dec. 19](#), where Regan, who would be the first Black man to lead EPA, elevated environmental justice (EJ) issues in his first public remarks since being picked for the job. "We will be driven by our convictions that every person in our great country has the right to clean air, clean water and a healthier life no matter how much money they have in their pockets, the color of their skin or the community that they live in," said Regan.

Biden selected Regan, who has led the Tar Heel State environment agency since 2017, over long-time California air chief Mary Nichols, who has decades of experience with air and climate policies. She had been considered the front-runner until EJ advocates [opposed her nomination](#) over their opposition to her implementation of the state's GHG cap-and-trade program.

One environmentalist says the lineup of environmental officials in Biden's administration "suggests that Gina will be running the show and telling Michael what to do, at least on climate, because he doesn't really have a [national profile]. I don't know what his voice is, and hers is so strong."

The source notes that when McCarthy was at EPA, her "big complaint" was that she did not have an advocate at the White House, "and now she will be there."

However, the source adds one concern about McCarthy -- currently the president and CEO of the Natural Resources Defense Council -- is that "she was never a champion of methane rules."

Environmentalists will be pushing EPA to issue stringent climate rules for vehicles and industrial facilities, including reinstating controls on oil and gas sector emissions of the potent GHG methane.

This source also questions Biden's choice of Granholm to lead DOE. "Choosing Gina in a way is somewhat obvious because she is deeply experienced. Choosing Mary would have been obvious because she too is deeply experienced. Choosing Jennifer Granholm to lead Energy is not so obvious," the source says, adding her record regarding setting efficiency standards is lacking.

However, other observers have also said Granholm has significant experience as a former governor who brings experience in addressing challenges facing the auto sector in her home state.

White House Approach

One industry source believes McCarthy is likely to play a helpful role in guiding EPA rules. "Gina did kind of come up through the ranks. She was a state regulator and then administrator, so she felt and saw first-hand what it's like. . . . I suspect she's going to be pretty inclusive with Mr. Regan. And she's well liked at the EPA, so she's got that going for her."

This source also points to Biden's Chief of Staff Ron Klain as "all about making progress," citing his work on the 2008-09 economic recovery when he worked for then-Vice President Biden, including on the auto industry bailout and the first round of EPA's vehicle GHG rules.

"He is very much about making things work, and having people talk, and being efficient, so I don't think there will be lots of walls erected" in which the White House develops a regulatory strategy largely in secret and then orders agencies to figure out how to implement it.

While this more open approach would be helpful at EPA, this source says "agencies that have not focused on these issues will find themselves challenged on climate and EJ. There is a lot more Interior could be doing, Labor for sure . . . and even Education. Climate and EJ will weave through everything," the source expects.

A second industry source, however, says it is not yet clear how climate team's division of labor will play out. "I don't think anyone really knows yet. . . . I suspect that Kerry will take the lead on all international negotiations and Gina will be the point person on coordinating domestic policies from all agencies and funneling them into one point. It seems pretty clear they will get face time with the president."

The fact that the two will be working from the White House and interacting with Biden "will be the most important and interesting function. It will also be the most different function that we've seen from all other administrations."

The source predicts agencies will develop their rulemakings internally and then take them to McCarthy to shepherd through the interagency process, while offering guidance during the internal process if needed.

While most observers expect a heavy reliance on executive action, the second industry source questions whether the Biden team will coordinate actions with Congress. “At some point, you think they would, but it’s uncertain as to how they will.”

‘Writes the Music’

Paul Bledsoe, a former Clinton administration official and now a strategic adviser at the Progressive Policy Institute, predicts that “Kerry and McCarthy are going to set overall policy, working with Biden and [Vice President Kamala] Harris and others in the White House.”

He says in modern presidential administrations, “the White House writes the music and most of the lyrics, too.”

Bledsoe cites other “power centers” in the administration, including Brian Deese as incoming director of the National Economic Council (NEC), Treasury Secretary-designate Janet Yellen and others. “But I think it’s pretty clear Kerry and McCarthy will be working with the president to set the broad agenda.”

During the Obama administration, the White House was “incredibly involved” in EPA rulemakings, he said. “If anything, we will have more experience in the White House now than we had under Obama,” he added, saying the environment team has the “most senior level experience you could imagine within the White House.”

That may mean that when automaker CEOs want to negotiate with the administration over vehicle GHG rules, they will call McCarthy, one former EPA official adds.

This source notes that the first phase of the agency’s existing auto GHG rules “was basically run out of the White House with Carol Browner,” who ran EPA in the Clinton administration and was a top White House climate adviser for the first two years of the Obama administration. There, she worked closely with EPA technical staff and then-Administrator Lisa Jackson. “But I think the really high-level stuff was done at the White House, and I think that is what is going to happen this time around,” the source says.

A third industry source warns that McCarthy may end up frustrated working with Kerry “and his ego.”

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