

Regional posts key as Obama admin reshapes agency

Contributed by ROBIN BRAVENDER, Greenwire
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Up next at U.S. EPA: appointments for regional administrators.

Those 10 posts are seen as critical to the Obama administration's efforts to reshape the agency, whose morale was said to have sagged under President George W. Bush. In its first months, the Obama EPA has shifted Bush-era policies on climate change and air pollution, and the White House has proposed massive agency budget increases.

Regional administrators are charged with building bridges between the administration and state and local governments.

Regional administrators "have a tremendous amount of authority over the relations with the states in their regions, the Superfund cleanups, the spills, the local controversies and the interactions with the state agencies," said John Walke, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Some expect to see a radical shift in the leadership of regional offices under President Obama.

"The staff at both headquarters and at the regions is so beaten down at this point and unwilling to make any radical changes or stick their neck out, they need active leadership," Earthjustice attorney Paul Cort said. "If anything's going to change at the regional level, they need a regional administrator who will stand up for them, be aggressive, take on headquarters when necessary."

Past administrations have drawn heavily on state and local officials to fill top posts in regional offices, insiders say, because the positions require so much close work with state and local governments.

"You really do want people where this isn't going to be their first big job," said former Region 9 administrator Felicia Marcus, who headed the San Francisco office in the Clinton administration after serving as president of the Board of Public Works for the city of Los Angeles.

Many leaders of the Obama EPA joined the agency after long stints as regulators. Administrator Lisa Jackson led New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection; air chief Gina McCarthy was Connecticut's top environmental regulator; and Stephen Owens, chief of EPA's pesticides and toxics office, headed the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality for seven years.

Of the pool of people thought to be under consideration for regional posts, "many of them seem to be current or former government officials at the federal, state and local level," said Bill Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies.

"That makes eminent sense to us," Becker added. "Pick someone who has experience out in the regions knowing what works and what doesn't, not someone who hasn't actually walked the walk."

But some say Obama could draw from advocacy groups, as well.

"I think the environmental community is a very important constituency for the Obama administration, and so they are much more likely to choose people who come out of the environmental-activist community, or at least state officials who have close ties with environmental groups," said Jeff Holmstead, who was EPA's top air official under President George W. Bush.

Several top officials at EPA headquarters have both advocacy and government experience.

Bob Perciasepe, the nominee for deputy administrator, has been chief operating officer for the National Audubon Society, assistant administrator in EPA's air and water offices during the Clinton administration and Maryland's top environmental official. Top enforcement official Cynthia Giles worked at the New England-based Conservation Law Foundation after working at the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection and leading enforcement efforts at EPA's Region 3 office in Philadelphia.

By contrast, the Bush administration drew several regional chiefs from the private sector. John Askew, president of the Iowa Soybean Association, served as Region 7 chief; L. John Iani, vice president for corporate affairs and general counsel for UniSea Inc., a major seafood company, was appointed Region 10 administrator; and James Palmer, the Region 4 administrator, came from a Memphis law firm, although he served before that as executive director of Mississippi's Department of Environmental Quality from 1987 to 1999.

Regional autonomy

Historically, EPA regional offices have had a large degree of autonomy, in part because "it's often difficult to be in Washington and pay attention to the operations that have been happening out in the regions," said Marcus Peacock, who served as deputy administrator in the Bush administration and now works at the Pew Charitable Trusts.

And with Jackson and other top officials expected to focus on ramping up climate programs and other regulatory programs, some observers expect regional chiefs to have a great deal of independence.

"Lisa Jackson's top priority is probably going to be climate, and she's going to be so focused on climate that she's going to want to depend on regional administrators taking a lot of responsibility," Becker said.

Even if Jackson and other EPA officials wanted to be very involved on a regional level, "There's no way they can," Holmstead said. "There's just too much going on."

Names in the mix

E&E interviewed dozens of sources to discuss key regional issues and to identify possible leading candidates for top posts. Many of the names that surfaced are those of EPA employees, state and local officials, and environmental advocates.

Region 1, Boston

Territory: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont and tribal nations.

Issues: Mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants; automobile emissions in congested areas; and waterways under pressure from increasing development. With EPA expected to take on responsibilities for regulating greenhouse gas emissions, the region will be watching the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

Possible administrators: David Cash, assistant secretary for policy at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and Charlie Lord, director of the Urban Ecology Institute at Boston College. The Boston Globe reported in February that the field had been narrowed to Cash and Lord. Other names that have been floated are Robert Varney, EPA Region 1 administrator in the Bush administration who joined an environmental consulting firm in February, and Curt Spalding, former executive director of the Rhode Island-based advocacy group Save the Bay.

Region 2, New York City

Territory: New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Issues: State regulators have been under fire for wastewater permit reviews, and some environmentalists are hoping the Obama EPA will step up its scrutiny of the Clean Water Act program. Air quality in major metropolitan areas will continue to be a major concern, and because New York and New Jersey are members of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, Region 2 may also help to shape EPA's climate policies. Stormwater management issues are facing Puerto Rico, where discharges from small municipal sewer systems can contaminate drinking water and recreational waterways.

Possible picks: Rich Kassel, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council's New York City office, and Judith Enck, New York Gov. David Paterson's (D) deputy secretary for the environment.

Region 3, Philadelphia

Territory: Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

Issues: Chesapeake Bay restoration, mountaintop coal mining, air quality nonattainment areas and abandoned hazardous-waste sites.

Possible picks: William Early, acting regional administrator, who has served as regional counsel since 1999, and Stanley Alpert, an environmental attorney in New York who served for 13 years as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

Region 4, Atlanta

Territory: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and six tribes.

Issues: Oversight of coal-fired power plants and coal-ash dumps. Of 44 coal-ash impoundment sites determined by the Obama administration to be high-hazard sites, 20 of them are this region. Wetlands protection is also a top issue, since the region includes Gulf Coast marshes and the Everglades.

Possible picks: Acting Region 4 Administrator Stanley Meiburg; acting Deputy Administrator Beverly Banister; Russell Wright, assistant administrator of Region 4's Office of Policy and Management; John Hankinson, former Region 4 administrator in the Clinton administration; and Jim Powell, a former senior official with the Energy Department who retired in 2007.

Region 5, Chicago

Territory: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Issues: Addressing high concentrations of contaminants in waterways that feed the Great Lakes and other water quality issues. The Region 5 post has been the subject of controversy in recent years, after Mary Gade, who headed the office under the Bush administration, said she was forced to resign after months of internal bickering with Dow Chemical Co. over dioxin contamination surrounding its Midland, Mich., plant (Greenwire, May 2, 2008).

Possible picks: Doug Scott, director of the Illinois EPA; Steve Chester, director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality; and Todd Ambs, administrator of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' water division.

Region 6, Dallas

Territory: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

Issues: Clean air and toxic cleanup programs will be top priorities in what one source called the "heart of the

petrochemical and oil and gas industries." The region includes Houston and Dallas, both of which exceed EPA's ozone standards.

Possible picks: John Hall, an industry lobbyist who has worked for Waste Management Inc. and a former head of the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission; Al Armendariz, an engineering professor at Southern Methodist University; and Ron Curry, secretary of the New Mexico Environment Department.

Region 7, Kansas City

Territory: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and nine tribal nations.

Issues: The relationship between agriculture, air quality and renewable energy is expected to be critical as the new administration and Congress work to craft climate legislation. Water quality and runoff pollution from agricultural sources are also pressing issues, and the new administrator could play a role in the regulatory battle over the controversial Sunflower coal-fired power plant planned for western Kansas.

Possible picks: Steve Mahfood, former director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. Former Kansas Rep. Nancy Boyda (D) from Kansas's 2nd District was also rumored to be a possible candidate early on, but she was sworn in last week as deputy assistant secretary of Defense for manpower and personnel at the Pentagon.

Region 8, Denver

Territory: Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming and 27 tribal nations.

Issues: Cleanup of the region's 69 Superfund sites will be a top priority. Last month, Administrator Jackson issued a public health emergency finding at the Libby Asbestos Superfund site in northwest Montana. The region is also home to the Leadville, Colo., Superfund site and other areas that bear the toxic legacy of the region's historic mining industry. Air and water quality concerns will also be key issues in a region with an increasing population and a booming oil and gas sector.

Possible picks: Jim Martin, director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment; Joshua Epel, assistant general counsel for DCP Midstream and a member of Colorado's Oil and Gas Commission; Macon Cowles, an environmental attorney who sits on Boulder, Colo.'s City Council; Roger Freeman, an environmental attorney at Davis, Graham & Stubbs in Denver; and Barbara Roberts, an independent consultant specializing in environment and natural resources issues and a member of the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission.

Region 9, San Francisco

Territory: Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, the Pacific Islands and tribal nations.

Issues: Air pollution continues to be a pressing issue for the region, which contains both Los Angeles and the San

Joaquin Valley, two of the most polluted areas in the nation. Tackling those issues will involve addressing motor vehicle standards and retrofitting older, dirtier diesel engines, sources say. The region is also engaged in efforts to improve the quality of water supplies and is working with states and other federal agencies to restore damaged ecosystems.

Possible picks: Peter Sherman, former executive director of MoveOn.org; Jared Blumenfeld, former interim chief of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department and director of the San Francisco Department of the Environment; Laura Yoshi, the acting Region 9 administrator; and Tim Carmichael, former president of the California Coalition for Clean Air.

Region 10, Seattle

Territory: Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and native tribes.

Issues: Efforts to protect and restore watersheds, including the Puget Sound, Columbia River and the Coeur d'Alene Basin. The region is also focused on reducing sources of mercury contamination in water and is working with the area's 270 tribal communities to build environmental management capacity and to restore natural resources.

Possible picks: Dennis Hession, former mayor of Spokane, Wash.; state Sen. Phil Rockefeller (D), who represents Washington's 23rd District; and Michael Grady, a natural resource specialist in the habitat conservation division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.