Oil industry stooge tapped to destroy the Environmental Protection Agency

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President-elect Donald Trump last Thursday nominated Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, a fervent advocate of deregulation and a tool of the oil and gas industry, to head the Environmental Protection Agency. The selection of Pruitt underscores the incoming administration's far-right agenda and determination to eviscerate any remaining regulatory obstacles to corporate profit.

Pruitt's chief qualification is his role in opposing anti-pollution rules issued by the EPA under the Obama administration. Pruitt filed or joined at least 13 lawsuits against the EPA, including leading a group of Republican Attorney Generals in fighting the Clean Power Plan, the 2015 rule governing carbon pollution from power plants.

Trump's selection of Pruitt follows the appointments of Ben Carson at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Tom Price at the Department of Health and Human Services, and Betsy DeVos at the Department of Education. Like Pruitt, they are all ideological opponents of the social programs implemented by those agencies.

Pruitt is particularly hostile to government action to mitigate climate change and seeks to undermine its scientific basis, falsely characterizing the link between human activity and global temperature rise as an open scientific question. "[The climate change] debate is far from settled," he wrote in *National Review* in May of this year. "Scientists continue to disagree about the degree and extent of global warming and its connection to the actions of mankind."

EPA is one of several agencies with a role in conducting research and implementing policies to address climate change. All of these agencies are targeted for wholesale changes by Trump. At the Department of Energy, his transition team issued a list of 74 information requests to the agency, including a demand to identify staff and contractors who worked on climate change. The purpose of such a request can only be to target federal workers who may be hostile to Trump's right-wing, anti-environmentalist agenda, intimidating opposition into silence.

Throughout his campaign, Trump issued vitriolic denunciations of the EPA in particular, pledging at various times to "abolish" or "refocus" the agency. Carrying forward Republican themes over the past decade, he blamed the loss of jobs by coal miners and other industrial workers on environmental protection, claiming the regulations make it impossible for US companies to compete. "For too long," Trump said in a statement announcing Pruitt's appointment, "the Environmental Protection Agency has spent taxpayer dollars on an out-of-control anti-energy agenda that has destroyed millions of jobs, while also undermining our incredible farmers and many other businesses and industries at every turn."

The "landing team" named by Trump to organize the transition at the agency was drawn from conservative think tanks with a record of subverting climate science and otherwise attacking environmental rules. David Schnare, currently a lawyer at the Energy and Environment Legal Institute and formerly at the Thomas Jefferson Institute, for example, was involved in the harassment of prominent scientist Michael Mann, seeking troves of emails to uncover supposed malpractice. He followed the same playbook in seeking to force two University of Arizona climate scientists to reveal years of email records.

Myron Ebell of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a right-wing advocacy group prominent for denying climate change, is heading the transition team. In addition to Schnare, Ebell is joined by figures from the

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Heritage Foundation, Federalist Society and Independence Institute.

Pruitt himself was connected to the Trump campaign through Harold Hamm, the billionaire CEO of the fracking giant Continental Resources and vocal supporter of Trump. Hamm served as honorary chairman of Pruitt's 2014 re-election campaign for Oklahoma Attorney General.

In Oklahoma, Pruitt forged close ties not only with Hamm but with the entire oil and gas industry which dominates the state's politics. He ran two federal political action committees out of his office, largely funded by the energy industry. One of them, Liberty 2.0, a so-called super PAC because it can raise unlimited money from corporations and individuals, raked in 46 percent of the $420,000 it collected since 2015 from fossil fuel interests. Pruitt's alliance with the industry was so blatant that he allowed one of the state's largest energy companies, Devon Energy, to ghost-write letters to EPA, which were signed by Pruitt on official state letterhead, an investigation by the *New York Times* revealed last year.

Pruitt also aligned himself with Christian fundamentalist groups in the state. He led legal campaigns against the removal of a Ten Commandments monument on the state capitol grounds, for "personhood" laws that award legal status to fertilized embryos, and for the distribution of Bibles at public schools.

Trump's nomination was denounced by environmental advocates. "Having Scott Pruitt in charge of the US Environmental Protection Agency is like putting an arsonist in charge of fighting fires," the Sierra Club's Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement. Bernie Sanders, who lined up along with virtually the entire Democratic leadership to legitimize the Trump's victory in the days following the election, bemoaned Scott Pruitt's nomination as "sad and dangerous."

While Republicans like Pruitt are the most rabid to gut the EPA, the Obama administration has overseen crippling cuts to staff and budgets, as part of its bipartisan budget deals with the congressional Republicans. Over the last two years the workforce was lower than at any time since 1990, when Clean Air Act amendments passed Congress. Adjusted for inflation, the 2016 budget is 22 percent lower than in 1990.

Obama's signature environmental rule, the Clean Power Plan, was a political fraud that, if it were to survive, would do little more than memorialize a transition already underway towards cheap natural gas in the power sector. The apoplectic opposition from the likes of Pruitt, who filed suit before the Clean Power Plan had even been finalized, has more to do with an ideological fight against controls on corporations than the practical impact of what are, in fact, largely business-friendly regulations issued by the Obama administration. The Clean Power Plan sought to provide assurances to Wall Street and major energy companies that their continued investment in fossil fuel technologies are safe.

The environmental disasters which unfolded under Obama's watch, from the BP oil spill to the Flint water crisis, demonstrate the subordination of health and environmental concerns to the profit interests of industry, regardless of which party writes the rules. Nonetheless, the nomination of Pruitt signals an attempt to rapidly accelerate the dismantling of whatever environmental gains had been made in previous decades.

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