

Senate confirms physicist Moniz as energy chief (Update)

16 May 2013, by Matthew Daly



In this April 9, 2013 file photo, Energy Secretary nominee Ernest Moniz, of Massachusetts testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington. The Senate has unanimously confirmed President Barack Obama's nominee to lead the Energy Department. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File)

Physicist Ernest Moniz won unanimous Senate confirmation Thursday to be the new U.S. energy secretary.

Moniz, 68, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, replaces Steven Chu, who served as Energy secretary in President Barack Obama's first term. Moniz served as an energy undersecretary in the Clinton administration.

Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat and chairman of the Senate Energy Committee, called Moniz "solution-oriented" and said he is "smart about energy policy and savvy about Energy Department operations."

The 97-0 Senate vote on Moniz was delayed for more than three weeks after Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Republican objected to Obama's plan to cut about \$200 million from a home-state project to turn weapons-grade plutonium into nuclear fuel.

Graham and other Republicans said the president's budget proposal jeopardized a plant being built at South Carolina's Savannah River nuclear site.

Graham made clear Thursday he had nothing against Moniz, calling him a "fine fellow." Graham said he has other "leverage points" to continue putting pressure on the Obama administration to fully fund the Savannah River project.

As energy secretary, Moniz will face an array of challenges, as the administration continues to promote renewable sources of energy such as wind and solar power, even as it pushed to promote traditional fuel such as oil and natural gas.

In particular, Moniz will soon decide whether to approve a major expansion of U.S. natural gas exports that could create thousands of jobs, spur economic growth and help offset the nation's enormous trade deficit.

Increased exports also could lead to further increases in hydraulic fracturing, a drilling technique also known as fracking that has allowed companies to gain access to huge stores of natural gas but raised widespread concerns about alleged groundwater contamination and even earthquakes.

Federal law requires the Energy Department to determine that natural gas exports are in the public interest before granting permits to countries that do not have free-trade agreements with the United States.

Moniz, who heads an energy initiative at MIT, is widely seen as sympathetic to the natural gas industry. At a Senate hearing last month, he called the "stunning increase" in natural gas production a "revolution" that has led to reduced emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases that cause global warming.

A recent study commissioned by the department

concluded that exporting natural gas would benefit the U.S. economy even if it leads to higher domestic prices for the fuel.

Skip Horvath, president and chief executive of the Natural Gas Supply Association, an industry group, called Moniz "informed, engaged and forthcoming" in his approach to natural gas. "His vast experience in energy will be an asset to the administration," Horvath said.

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