Trump to tap champion of fossil fuels as environmental chief

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Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt arrives at Trump Tower in New York, Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2016. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

President-elect Donald Trump is expected to nominate Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt to lead the Environmental Protection Agency, a source close to Pruitt said Wednesday.

Pruitt, a 48-year-old Republican, has been a reliable booster of the fossil

fuel industry and an outspoken critic of what he derides as the EPA's "activist agenda." Pruitt was spotted visiting Trump Tower Wednesday.

The person close to Pruitt who provided the information was not authorized to speak publicly about Trump's pick and did so only on condition of anonymity.

Environmental groups quickly denounced Pruitt as a puppet of polluters, with the Sierra Club likening his selection as EPA administrator to "putting an arsonist in charge of fighting fires."

Though Trump had not yet officially named Pruitt as his nominee, senior adviser Kellyanne Conway appeared to confirm Pruitt had gotten the nod as she exited Trump Tower Wednesday evening.

"We're very accustomed to the naysayers and the critics," Conway said. "Attorney General Pruitt has great qualifications and a good record. ... We look forward to the confirmation hearings."

Representatives of the nation's mining and oil interests also cheered Trump's choice.

"Scott Pruitt is a businessman and public servant and understands the impact regulation and legislation have in the business world," said Jeffrey McDougall, an oilman who serves as chairman of the Oklahoma Independent Petroleum Association. "His appointment will put rational and reasonable regulation at the forefront."

Though his academic degrees are in political science and law, Pruitt has been a vocal public denier of the science showing that the Earth is warming and that man-made carbon emissions are to blame.

In an opinion article published earlier this year by National Review,

Pruitt suggested that the debate over global warming "is far from settled" and claimed "scientists continue to disagree about the degree and extent of global warming and its connection to the actions of mankind."

According to NASA, 97 percent of the world's climate scientists agree that the planet is getting hotter and that burning fossil fuels is the primary cause. Ten of the warmest years in history have occurred in the past 12, with 2016 on pace to be the hottest recorded. Studies show the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have decreased in mass, while the world's oceans have risen on average nearly 7 inches in the last century.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, who is poised to serve as the Democratic leader in the next Congress, said his party plans to press Pruitt with "tough questions" in his confirmation hearing.

Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt arrives at Trump Tower in New York, Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2016. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

"Attorney General Pruitt's reluctance to accept the facts or science on climate change couldn't make him any more out of touch with the American people—and with reality," said Schumer of New York. "President-elect Trump promised to break the special interests' grip on Washington, but his nomination of Mr. Pruitt—who has a troubling history of advocating on behalf of big oil at the expense of public health—only tightens it."

Sen. Jim Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who shares Pruitt's skepticism of climate science, praised Pruitt's record of fighting back "against unconstitutional and overzealous environmental regulations."

Representing his state as attorney general since 2011, Pruitt has repeatedly sued the EPA. He joined with other Republican attorneys general in opposing the Clean Power Plan, which seeks to limit planet-warming carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants. Pruitt has argued that curbing carbon emissions would trample the rights of states, drive up electricity rates, threaten the reliability of the nation's power grid and "create economic havoc."

He also filed court briefs in support of the Keystone XL Pipeline project, blocked by the Obama administration, which runs through his state. Pruitt also sued the EPA over the agency's recent expansion of water bodies regulated under the federal Clean Water Act, which has been opposed by industries that would be forced to clean up polluted wastewater.

"Respect for private property rights have allowed our nation to thrive, but with the recently finalized rule, farmers, ranchers, developers, industry and individual property owners will now be subject to the unpredictable, unsound and often byzantine regulatory regime of the

EPA," Pruitt said last year.

Though Pruitt ran unopposed for a second term in 2014, campaign finance reports show he raised more than $700,000, with many of his top donors hailing from the energy and utility industries. Among those who gave the maximum contribution of $5,000 to Pruitt's campaign was Continental Resources Chairman and CEO Harold Hamm, an Oklahoma oil tycoon who has been advising Trump.

Trump has called global warming a "hoax" and said he plans to abandon the U.S. commitment to reduce carbon emissions as part of the international agreement signed last year in Paris. During the campaign, the New York billionaire said he would like to abolish the EPA, or at least gut regulations he says impede corporate profits.

Environmental groups say they are girding up to defend the Obama administration's environmental legacy in court.

"Scott Pruitt has built his political career by trying to undermine EPA's mission of environmental protection," said Fred Krupp, president of the Environmental Defense Fund. "He is a deeply troubling choice to head the agency that protects the clean air all Americans breathe and the clean water we drink."

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