

December 16, 2008

Obama Announces Energy Team

On December 15, President-elect Barack Obama formally announced four key figures who will drive Administration policy on energy and the environment: Carol Browner, Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change; Steven Chu, Secretary of Energy; Lisa Jackson, EPA Administrator; and Nancy Sutley, Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Later this week, the President-elect also intends to name his nominee for Secretary of the Interior, another important driver of the President elect's energy policy agenda. Reportedly, the nominee will be Senator Ken Salazar, a first-term senator from Colorado. The President-elect did not announce the creation of a new National Energy Council to coordinate the Administration's policies across agencies, although such an announcement may be coming in the near future.

Throughout the presidential campaign, Obama made energy policy a key component of his domestic policy platform, pledging to tackle climate change in a meaningful way, boost the use of renewable sources of electricity and fuels, and shore up energy security by reducing dependence on foreign oil. Although the financial crisis will likely impede his ambitious agenda in the short-term, it has also provided him and his team a unique opportunity to use the economic stimulus package expected in late January to begin to implement some of his energy policy. The stimulus will likely include financial incentives for alternative energy development and direct investment in infrastructure and energy efficiency. The following is a brief description of Obama's team leaders and how they are likely to influence federal energy and environmental policy in the coming years.

Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change – Carol Browner

Carol Browner has been named to be President-elect Obama's point person, or "energy czar", responsible for coordinating energy and climate policy in the Administration. It is also expected that Browner would be the head of the National Energy Council, in the event it is established. Unlike the other three individuals named, Browner will not have to be confirmed by the Senate. Browner, the EPA Administrator from 1993 to 2001 during the Clinton Administration is expected to be the central point in the White House coordinating the new administration's energy and climate change efforts. In this role, Browner will be responsible for ensuring that executive branch agencies and offices carry out the President-elect's policies. The position is intended to cut across agency lines and coordinate disparate initiatives related to climate change and energy policy, as part of a transformational effort to emphasize "green" energy and fuels and a "green" economy that creates new jobs.

Browner is the most high-profile member of the President-elect's energy and environmental team, and thus is expected to be the public face of Obama's energy and climate policies. Less certain is whether she alone will have Obama's ear on energy and climate matters, acting as a filter between the President and his cabinet appointees. If so, this could create political tensions between the White House and the executive agencies, as it would elevate a staffer above departmental secretaries, who enjoy a degree of public support and endorsement via the Senate confirmation process.

Since leaving EPA, Browner has been a principal at the Albright Group, an international consulting firm headed by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, and has also served as chairman of the board of the National Audubon Society.

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Browner supports EPA's discretion to regulate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions under the Clean Air Act and endorses using this authority to prod Congress to establish a comprehensive cap-and-trade program. She was critical of the Bush Administration's decision last year to deny California's request to regulate vehicle carbon dioxide emissions and has indicated that this decision should be reconsidered. Browner has previously opposed expansion of offshore oil and natural gas drilling — a position that could put her in direct conflict with President-elect Obama's national security advisor, General James Jones, who has expressed support for expanding production to promote U.S. energy independence.

Department of Energy Secretary – Steven Chu

President-elect Obama will nominate physicist Steven Chu to be the Secretary of the Department of Energy. Chu shared the Nobel Prize in 1997 and currently directs the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, operated by the Energy Department, which conducts research on solar energy and advanced biofuels. While Obama had indicated on the campaign trail that he wanted the Energy Secretary to play a broader role in setting national energy policy, the selection of a physicist like Chu, may indicate that the Energy Secretary will focus on the nation's nuclear program and efforts to promote the development of innovative technologies in the renewable energy sector. Chu has little inside-the-Beltway experience, which may mean he is more amenable to working with Browner as the energy czar. Nevertheless, Chu has an impressive background in climate science and alternative energy, having crafted climate models based on the greenhouse gas effects of carbon dioxide and having advanced the theory that nonfood plants can be biologically engineered to make liquid fuels and electricity from sunlight. He will therefore be a valuable advisor as the Administration looks to add alternative energy funding in an economic stimulus package in order to lay the groundwork for a push toward comprehensive climate change legislation in 2010 or 2011.

EPA Administrator – Lisa Jackson

Lisa Jackson will serve as EPA Administrator in the Obama Administration. Jackson, a Princeton-trained chemical engineer, was recently appointed chief of staff to New Jersey Governor John Corzine, and before that had served as Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). Before joining NJDEP, she spent 16 years at U.S. EPA where she managed the Region II Superfund program and later served as Deputy Director and Acting Director of Enforcement in New York and in Washington, D.C.

While at NJDEP, Jackson helped coordinate New Jersey's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), an emissions trading program involving several Northeast states, and pushed for the adoption of a state-wide goal to reduce emissions by 80% by 2050. Jackson's experience with RGGI may offer a blueprint for an eventual federal cap-and-trade initiative. In 2007, she announced that New Jersey would join a lawsuit brought by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to overturn the Bush Administration's denial of California's request to regulate vehicle GHG emissions.

Jackson's anticipated appointment has not been met by universal praise. The U.S. EPA recently criticized New Jersey for moving too slowly to clean up some toxic waste sites, and some environmentalists criticized Jackson for giving in to pressure from industry. Jackson was also the center of controversy when a day care facility was discovered to be in a building known to have extremely high levels of mercury. However, her measured approach and consensus-building led to her appointment as Corzine's Chief of Staff and not as EPA Administrator. She will inherit an under-funded, over-worked agency that has a myriad of hot-button environmental issues to address in early 2009 and beyond.

White House Council on Environmental Quality Chair – Nancy Sutley

President-elect Obama selected Nancy Sutley to head the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), where she will advise Obama on federal and international environmental policy. Sutley has served in a number of positions at the California and federal EPA, perhaps most notably as Energy Advisor to former California Governor Gray Davis. There, she weathered the Enron scandal and, by coordinating a multi-agency response to the collapse, was ultimately considered part of the resolution. Currently, Sutley is the Deputy Mayor of Los Angeles for Energy and Environment, where she has played an active role in climate change and alternative energy initiatives. Such initiatives include “Green LA,” a climate change plan to reduce greenhouse gas emission levels in Los Angeles to 35% below 1990 levels by 2020, the most aggressive plan of any major city in the United States. Other initiatives include investing in municipal solid waste-to-energy plants and raising sales taxes to pay for pollution-reducing transportation initiatives. Sutley will likely continue to push for climate change initiatives and alternative energy development plans, with a special focus on lobbying Congress. Her role, however, may overlap considerably with that of Carol Browner's role as the President's top energy and environmental advisor. However, Sutley formerly served as a special assistant to Browner while the latter was head of the EPA, which may help smooth possible conflicts between the two.



If you have any questions regarding this alert, or the services we provide, please feel free to contact any of the attorneys listed below or the Sutherland attorney with whom you regularly work.

Dena E. Wiggins	202.383.0499	dena.wiggins@sutherland.com
Susan G. Lafferty	202.383.0168	susan.lafferty@sutherland.com
Benjamin Norris	202.383.0917	benjamin.norris@sutherland.com
Gregory R. Staiti	202.383.0833	greg.staiti@sutherland.com
Nathaniel J. Teti	202.383.0868	nathaniel.teti@sutherland.com