

# US Senate confirms industry stooge to head Environmental Protection Agency

By Daniel de Vries  
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The US Senate voted Friday to confirm former Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt was approved with 54 votes in favor and 46 against in a near party-line ballot. Democrats Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota broke ranks, joining Republicans in support of Pruitt. Maine Republican Susan Collins voted along with the remaining Democrats against the confirmation.

Pruitt is part of a slate of right-wing, anti-regulation ideologues nominated by President Donald Trump and approved by the Senate for top positions within the executive branch. He has no environmental qualifications apart from his strident opposition to the agency he now leads. As Oklahoma attorney general, Pruitt filed at least 14 lawsuits challenging the authority of the EPA to regulate industry.

As head of the EPA, Pruitt will lead an effort to gut anti-pollution requirements for American businesses. He will also oversee an attempt to dramatically shrink the EPA's current workforce of 15,000.

Of 22 cabinet-level appointments, only labor secretary nominee Andrew Puzder has thus far failed to garner enough support for Senate confirmation. He withdrew Wednesday after opposition emerged within the Republican Party in the face of accusations of domestic violence and his hiring of an undocumented immigrant. Eight nominees are still awaiting committee hearings or approval votes.

The ability of the Republican Party to push through two-thirds of Trump's nominees to date, forming a cabinet of billionaires, ex-generals and social reactionaries, is in large part due to the half-hearted and duplicitous character of the Democrats' opposition. Whatever differences exist over how fast and how far to roll back the social reforms of the 20th century,

including protection of health and the environment, they are overshadowed by the disputes that have emerged over foreign policy. The focal point of opposition from the Democrats is a their neo-McCarthyite campaign to ensure there is no let up in the aggressive stance towards Russia.

The Democrats responded to Pruitt's nomination in similar fashion to their response to other Trump nominees for domestic policy departments, nominally protesting their far-right character but mounting no serious challenge. They twice boycotted Senate Environment and Public Works Committee votes on Pruitt, only to watch Republicans suspend committee rules and move the confirmation to the full Senate for approval.

Democrats made a last minute push to delay final voting Friday until after thousands of email communications between the former Oklahoma attorney general and oil and gas companies are released next week. A federal court in Oklahoma ruled Thursday in favor of a citizen group's Freedom of Information Act inquiry requesting the communications. Senate Democrats pressed for a week's delay, assuming that the documents would reveal the scandalous relationship between Pruitt and regulated industries he was backing in lawsuits against the EPA.

Yet the role of Pruitt as a shill for the fossil fuel industry is already well documented. His policy positions as Oklahoma attorney general directly lined up with, and at times were authored by, the state's powerful oil and gas industry. His fundraising operation was dominated by donations from energy companies. There is no shortage of material documenting this alliance, including a 2011 letter to the EPA signed by Pruitt, secretly written by one of

Oklahoma's biggest drilling companies, Devon Energy.

In his confirmation hearings, Pruitt indicated his intention to aggressively carry out Trump's deregulation agenda. "If confirmed," he said during his opening statement last month, "I will utilize the relationships I have forged with my counterparts in the states to ensure that EPA returns to its proper role, rather than using a heavy hand to coerce the states into effectuating EPA policies."

The EPA policies immediately targeted for "returning to the states" include rules governing climate change and pollution discharges into wetlands. President Trump is expected visit EPA headquarters and announce executive orders related to the agency's work that will "suck the air out of the room," a source inside the administration reportedly told *Inside EPA*. EPA staffers were told in briefings with senior leadership to expect between two and five executive orders forthcoming, but no information was provided on their content.

As for the longer-term strategy, Myron Ebell, the former chair of Trump's EPA transition team, indicated in an interview last month with the *Washington Post* his vision for the future. Ebell recommended cutting staffing to 5,000 from the current 15,000. "Regulatory overreach" will be much more difficult "if the agency is a lot smaller," he said. He also suggested cutting the agency's \$8.1 billion budget in half.

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