

Scott Pruitt confirmed as EPA chief; Democrats' stalling fails amid email controversy



FILE - In this Jan. 18, 2017, file photo, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator nominee, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington at his confirmation hearing before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Senate Republicans are poised ... more >

By Ben Wolfgang - The Washington Times - Friday, February 17, 2017

Scott Pruitt won confirmation Friday to be administrator of the EPA, foiling Democrats' attempts to hold up his nomination until the former Oklahoma attorney general complies with a judge's order and releases thousands of emails between his office and oil-and-gas companies.

In a highly contentious vote that came on the heels of a last-ditch delaying effort from Democrats, Mr. Pruitt was approved to head the agency in a vote of 52 to 46.

The vote broke largely along party lines, though two Democrats — Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Sen. Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota — backed Mr. Pruitt.

Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine voted against him, saying she does not believe he's fit to head the EPA. She was the only member of the caucus to vote against Mr. Pruitt.

Democrats wanted to hold off the vote until later this month, citing the looming release of thousands of Mr. Pruitt's emails. Mr. Pruitt was ordered by an Oklahoma judge Thursday night to turn over by Tuesday a trove of emails containing communications with fossil-fuels companies.

Those documents, Democrats argued, likely will show collusion between Mr. Pruitt and oil-and-gas firms and could be reason to disqualify him for the post. The Center for Media and Democracy has sought the emails for the past two years, but Mr. Pruitt's office has released only 411 of the roughly 3,000 messages in question.

By voting ahead of next week's email release, they said, the Senate was acting irresponsibly.

"This judge has given us the opportunity to gain wisdom to make smarter decisions, to make a better informed decision," said Sen. Tom Carper, Delaware Democrat. "We are in a sense, voting without this information, flying blind. ... It's worth waiting an extra week to get this information before voting today without it."

Republicans rejected those arguments and said Democrats merely wanted to hold up the vote for as long as possible in an effort to deny President Trump the help he needs in the federal government. A motion made by Senate Democrats to extend debate on Mr. Pruitt's nomination for another five days failed.

"These delays are all about obstruction. They're all about denying President Trump his cabinet," said Sen. John Barrasso, Wyoming Republican and chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. "That's what this is all about. It's about pretending their candidate, Hillary Clinton, didn't lose the election in November."

In raising concerns about what could be in the emails Democrats point to a 2011 letter sent by Mr. Pruitt to the EPA, raising questions about the agency's conclusions regarding harmful emissions from natural gas wells. The majority of the language in the letter was lifted directly from documents written by Devon Energy, an Oklahoma oil company.

During testimony before a Senate panel last month, Mr. Pruitt didn't deny using the company's language, but said it was his job as Oklahoma attorney general to advocate on behalf of his state's interests, including the interests of major industries in the state like the oil and gas sector.

Democrats have blasted Mr. Pruitt's logic in that particular situation and believe the looming email trove will show other examples of collusion between the two sides.

Regardless of what's in the emails, it's clear that Mr. Pruitt will take the EPA in a much different direction than the course it has been on for the past eight years. The administrator plans to undo key Obama-era regulations, including the EPA's Clean Power Plan, which established the first set of limits on carbon emissions from power plants.

He's also vowed to roll back rules giving the EPA wide authority over virtually all bodies of water across the country.

Energy advocates praised Friday's vote and said Mr. Pruitt will move the EPA away from efforts to fight climate change and back to its original purpose of protecting the nation's air and water while not standing in the way of job creation and economic growth.

"Mr. Pruitt understands the critical importance of implementing policies that both support our economy and protect the environment," Barry R. Keefe, president of the Independent Petroleum Association of America, said in a statement. "Having a clear and fair regulatory framework is critical for independent producers, companies that work every day to safely produce the energy we all rely upon to power our everyday lives while ensuring the environment is protected, conserved, and restored in a balanced, commonsense manner."

But environmentalists said Mr. Pruitt's confirmation is a dark moment for the EPA and for the country, and they said all senators who voted in favor of him — especially the two Democrats, Mr. Manchin and Ms. Heitkamp — will pay a political price.

"Senators voting yes condemned millions of Americans to diseases including asthma, cancer and heart disease. The increased impacts from climate change on communities in the global south will be far worse," said Ben Schreiber, a political strategist with the environmental activist group Friends of the Earth. "Today, Democratic Senators Heidi Heitkamp and Joe Manchin showed no such courage. They put big oil profits above the American people in a desperate attempt to save their political careers. With today's vote, they undermined the resistance to Trump's extreme agenda."

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