

As with any President, Trump's ability to achieve his agenda will depend on the people he's chosen to run the government. His energy and environment picks will follow the party line of expanding fossil fuels. Yet they may not be as extremist as their predecessors in the first Trump Administration or as some of Trump's current advisors.

The Cast of Characters

First, a quick introduction to the team of players.

[Lee Zeldin](#) is the choice to head EPA. He's a former member of Congress from Long Island and a Trump loyalist. His previous experience with environmental issues is limited to some work in Congress relating to Long Island Sound. He's not zealously anti-environmental or a climate denier, unlike Trump's initial pick to run EPA in his first term, Scott Pruitt. It sums things up to say that his environmental scorecard as a former member of Congress was worse than any Democrat – but is still better than any Republican in the current Congress.

[Doug Burgum](#) will head Interior and serve as the energy czar. As Governor of North Dakota, he strongly favored fossil fuel development, but he also seemed serious about the idea that “all of the above” includes wind and solar. Burgum acknowledges the reality of climate change, though his preferred solution is removing carbon from the atmosphere.

Probably the most concerning of the group is [Chris Wright](#), the proposed Secretary of Energy. Wright is the CEO of a fracking company and (surprise, surprise) an evangelist for fossil fuels. He doesn't seem to be utterly opposed to other sources of energy such as small modular reactors, but he's convinced that fossil fuels are essential to society. His selection is mostly important because of DOE's role in administering grants under the Inflation Reduction Act; he is unlikely to have an interest in supporting renewable energy. Current litigation over Trump's hiring freeze could influence how much power Wright will have to hold back funding.

There's one key person missing from the lineup so far, the so-called **regulatory czar** — more formally, the head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) in the White House. OIRA oversees agency regulation and in particular whether the agency has complied with requirements like cost-benefit analysis. In part, OIRA serves as a source of quality control, making sure that the agency has followed the right procedures and provided adequate explanations and evidence for its actions. In the first Trump Administration, OIRA generally seemed to be steamrolled by White House ideologues. Conservatives used to champion cost-benefit analysis, but that was before MAGA.

Implications for Policy

What are we to make of all this? First, all of these are Trump loyalists who all support expansion of fossil fuels. None of them will be good for the environment, the only question is how bad they will be.

Second, among the universe of people Trump could have selected, this trio is probably about as good as you could get. That's a testament to just how bad Trump's choices could have been., given the picks for other positions as RFK Jr. and Tulsi Gabbard. We should be grateful that he didn't pick Marjorie Taylor Greene to run EPA.

While they're not as bad as they could be, it's not clear how much weight the environment and energy appointees will carry. In the behind-the-scenes tug of war to influence Trump's decisions, Zeldin, Burgum, and Wright don't seem likely to be campaigning for radical measures. Their ability to carry out their policies will also be hampered by loss of staff and expertise due to DOGE.

A lot may depend on the identity of their aides. There was a time when cabinet officers got to pick their staffs. That was long ago, in a galaxy far, far away. Today, the best they can do is lobby the White House and hope for the best. So far, Trump's choices for deputy secretary positions have greater agency experience than their bosses. But those deputy secretaries may find given extensive staff losses and the Administration's hostile attitude toward the people who do the government's work.

An unanswered question from the first Trump Administration is whether agencies did badly in court because of incompetent agency leadership or because agency heads wanted (or the White House mandated) actions that were very hard to defend. The agency leadership may be better this time — at least compared to the likes of Scott Pruitt. But the White House seems even more out of control than in Trump's first Administration, which may challenge the ability of agencies to create legally defensible policies.