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President Trump Seen as 'Complete Wild Card' for Environment

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Businessman Donald Trump is seen as a “complete wild card” by many in his own party on environmental and energy issues if elected president, while Democrats say his vague public statements in those areas nevertheless show his presidency would be a disaster.

Trump, now the Republican front-runner after three consecutive primary wins, has described climate change as a Chinese conspiracy and promised deep cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency if elected but also has avoided commenting on specific environmental policies such as the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan.

“I’m not sure anyone really knows what he'd do on the environment,” Ford O'Connell, a Republican strategist who advised Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) on energy issues during his 2008 presidential run, told Bloomberg BNA. “He’s going to look at it from the best interest of the American job market. His default will be to look at it from that perspective.”

More than half a dozen other Republican strategists and former aides told Bloomberg BNA they see Trump's public statements as evidence he would oppose significant regulatory initiatives, but they also acknowledge uneasiness over a lack of policy specifics and the New York businessman's desire to be seen as a deal-maker.

They also told Bloomberg BNA they expect Trump will avoid specific policy promises as long as possible, and described the billionaire as “an enigma,” “highly unpredictable” and “hard to pin down.”

Trump's campaign did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Democrats Fear 'Disastrous' Presidency

Even though Trump has avoided specifically discussing major environmental policies, such as the Clean Power Plan and last year's international climate agreement in Paris, Democratic observers say the businessman's public statements show he would be disastrous for the environment.

“We have to assume that he is a knee-jerk, anti-environmental candidate,” Paul Bledsoe, a former White House energy aide under Bill Clinton, told Bloomberg BNA. “It’s fairly obvious

he would be a disastrous candidate for the environment, and certainly foreign leaders are appalled by Trump.”

Bledsoe, who now supports Hillary Clinton for president, and other Democrats told Bloomberg BNA that Trump would appoint someone to the U.S. Supreme Court who would overturn the Clean Power Plan and likely try to back the U.S. out of the Paris agreement, in which nations around the world agreed for the first time to combat climate change .

“He has shown that he would tear up all international agreements, which would include” the Paris Agreement, Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) told Bloomberg BNA. “He's shown that he has no understanding of these issues, no passion for these issues and no constituency for these issues. And so anybody who cares about the preservation of natural resources, about climate, should be terribly alarmed about the possibility of Donald Trump being president.”

Climate Hoax Alleged

Since entering the presidential contest in June 2015, Trump has called climate change a hoax, said he would not have attended the international climate conference in Paris and vowed to dramatically slash, or even eliminate, the EPA budget.

“I'm not a believer in man-made—look, this planet is so massive,” Trump said in a June 2015 Fox News appearance. “And when I hear Obama saying that climate change is the number one problem, it is just madness.”

During a Dec. 31 rally in South Carolina, Trump referred to climate change as a “money-making industry” and a hoax. In contrast to that position, more than 97 percent of climate scientists believe human activity is the primary driver of climate change.

“Given what he's said, it's really hard to imagine a worse president for the environment than Donald Trump,” Seth Stein, a spokesman for the League of Conservation Voters, told Bloomberg BNA. “His presidency would be an absolute disaster for environmental protection and action on climate change.”

At various points in his campaign, Trump has promised severe cuts or even elimination of the EPA, which he described as a “disgrace” during an October 2015 appearance on Fox News.

“Every week they come out with new regulations,” Trump said. “They're making it impossible.”

Asked who then would ensure environmental protection, the businessman replied, “We'll be fine with the environment. We can leave a little bit, but you can't destroy businesses.”

'He'll Probably Be Frustrated.'

Such exchanges provide evidence to some observers that Trump doesn't understand the bureaucratic hurdles he would face running a government. They doubt he actually would like serving as president, if elected.

“He plays by his own rules, and he doesn't care what anyone else does,” Marianne Horinko, former EPA acting administrator during the George W. Bush administration, told Bloomberg BNA. “I'm not sure how that translates into actually governing.”

Trump could not, for instance, lay off thousands of federal employees due to labor protections, and he would have to follow mandatory duties outlined in existing statutes, unless Congress were to pass new laws.

“He’s never been inside a federal bureaucracy—it’s not like a reality show where you can just fire people,” Horinko, now president of the Horinko Group, said. “He’ll probably be frustrated with how hard it is to really affect change.”

Scant Knowledge of Specifics

One of the other areas of concern for Republican observers is Trump's seeming lack of familiarity with high-profile environmental and energy policy, leaving them without a clear sign for how he would respond in the White House.

Asked in December about a high-profile water jurisdictional rulemaking, Trump replied that water regulations left him unable to wash his hair properly in the shower. At another rally he lamented concerns over ozone pollution left him unable to use hair spray to style his hair.

“Trump is a complete wild card on all issues,” Chris Warren, a spokesman for the American Energy Alliance, told Bloomberg BNA. “I don’t know when or if we’ll get more clarity on his positions.”

“Of course, we would like to know where he’d come down on these issues, but that’s just not the way this election cycle has come down,” Warren said.

O’Connell, the Republican strategist, predicted Trump would stay away from specifics throughout the election—“he wants to remain unpredictable”—and said the billionaire businessman has shown himself able to shrug off pressure to get more specific.

Views From Capitol Hill

Republicans on Capitol Hill continue to downplay the likelihood that Trump ultimately will become their party's nominee, but several said they would work to educate him on specific policy matters if the need arose.

“If [Trump] is not well-informed on some of the overregulation that we're dealing with right now, I would try to impact that,” Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), a supporter of Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), told Bloomberg BNA. “I have every reason to believe he'll listen, so we'll have to wait and see.”

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), one of the leading advocates for action on climate change, told Bloomberg BNA it is “hard to know” exactly how Trump might approach the environment as president given his history of wavering on various positions.

“Right now, he has to appeal to a fossil fuel industry that won't tolerate any sort of conservation about climate change,” Whitehouse said. “But that may shift; he's certainly a shifting person.”

Grim Outlook for Power Plan

Observers from both parties did agree, despite his lack of public comment, that Trump would oppose the Clean Power Plan and look to appoint a Supreme Court justice who would overturn it.

Patrick Michaels, director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute, told Bloomberg BNA in an e-mail that Trump repeatedly calling climate change a hoax suggests he would oppose the Obama administration's effort to curb carbon dioxide emissions from power plants.

That regulation has been stayed by the U.S. Supreme Court pending further legal proceedings .

“I expect him to initially side with the 5-4 Supreme Court stay, which will clearly last through the election, and he will promise to nominate a justice who will throw it out,” Michaels said.

Bledsoe, the environmental veteran of the Clinton White House, agreed but said Trump would go further by appointing cabinet members to undermine the Obama administration's domestic and international environmental accomplishments.

“That’s what makes him so dangerous,” Bledsoe said.

Skeptical of Wind, Solar

Several observers also told Bloomberg BNA they expect Trump would push nuclear energy and natural gas over renewable energy sources such as wind and solar, which the billionaire has long criticized.

“Green energy is way behind the times,” Trump said during a March 2012 Fox News interview. “You look at the windmills that are destroying shorelines all over the world. Economically, they’re not good. It’s a very, very poor form of energy.”

During the same interview, Trump said “the technology is not there yet” for solar power and criticized President Barack Obama earlier in the year for “wasting our tax dollars on unproven technologies and risky companies” after the bankruptcy of solar panel manufacturer Solyndra LLC.

At the end of the day, strategists from both parties said the businessman's policy positions will be impossible to predict unless Trump announces them.

“I wish I could give you something more insightful, but he is an enigma for sure,” one former Republican Senate chief of staff said.