

Senate votes to confirm former Texas governor Rick Perry as energy secretary

By Steven Mufson March 2 at 2:09 PM

The Washington Post

The Senate voted 62 to 37 Thursday afternoon to confirm former Texas governor Rick Perry as energy secretary, brushing aside Perry's onetime vow to abolish the department.

The genial Republican drew less fire from Democrats during his confirmation process than other Trump nominees, but Perry now faces many of the same tough issues over regulations, the department's activities to slow climate change and potentially deep cuts in manpower and spending.

As Texas governor, Perry presided over a boom in all kinds of energy production, including wind power and shale drilling. Many of his supporters cited that record as evidence that he could help a similarly wide variety of energy interests.

But Perry's foes criticized his tepid acknowledgment of climate change, his strong ties to his state's oil and gas industry, and his lack

of experience with the department's main budgetary area, the maintenance of the nation's nuclear stockpile. And they wondered whether he will be able to protect the department's national laboratories and other scientific research against those who would slash the budget.

It is something of a surprise landing for Perry, who ran for president in 2012 and 2016 with dismal results. During a presidential debate in 2011, he famously forgot the name of the department, one of three he had pledged to eliminate.

The Energy Department is a basket of different activities. Most of its budget goes to maintaining the nuclear weapons stockpile and cleaning up an old weapons site in Hanford, Wash. It runs the national laboratories, sets appliance standards, hands out loans and grants for basic research and early stage energy technologies from carbon capture and storage to battery technology.

Renewable energy supporters expressed hope.

“As Governor of Texas, Rick Perry saw firsthand the positive economic impact as the Lone Star state diversified its energy production mix, resulting in more than 143,000 advanced energy jobs, success integrating more wind onto the grid than anywhere else, improving energy efficiency, and now experiencing a solar boom,” said Malcolm Woolf, senior vice president for policy and government affairs at the business-backed Advanced Energy Economy. “We look forward to working with DOE Secretary Perry, to continue this significant business opportunity to expand advanced energy that now supports more than 3 million workers across the nation.”

So too did the nation's appliance makers, whose products are regulated for energy efficiency by the Energy Department. Stephen Yurek, president of the Air-Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Institute, said "it is important that the Secretary ensure that the regulatory process, now 40 years old and in need of significant reform, operates fairly and consistently for all stakeholders."

But the environmental group 350.org executive director May Boeve said in a statement that "Trump just added one more unqualified fossil fuel shill and climate-denier to his cabinet."

Friends of the Earth senior strategic adviser Damon Moglen noted: "Over the course of his career, Rick Perry has taken millions of dollars from the oil, gas and nuclear industries while pushing their dirty energy agenda."

He added, "Unlike the preeminent physicists who ran the department for the last eight years, Perry lacks the knowledge and experience to run the DOE." Moglen called the idea that Perry would be able to clean up the nation's nuclear weapons facilities an "absurdity."