

Green steps

The president's climate-change agenda marches slowly on

"If congress won't act soon to protect future generations, I will," Barack Obama said last month in his state-of-the-union speech. "I will direct my cabinet to come up with executive actions we can take, now and in the future, to reduce pollution, prepare our communities for the consequences of climate change, and speed the transition to more sustainable sources of energy." This week Mr Obama named the officials charged with fulfilling that directive: Gina McCarthy, his choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency, and Ernest Moniz, the prospective new secretary of energy. Their selection suggests that Mr Obama is indeed serious about tackling climate change, but not doctrinaire in his approach.

Ms McCarthy already works at the EPA, where she is in charge of air quality. That has given her a leading role drafting the administration's most ambitious and controversial environmental rules, including limits on emissions of greenhouse gases for new power plants and strict fuel-efficiency requirements for cars. She is the natural candidate to oversee the most obvious and consequential step Mr Obama could take to stem global warming: a regulation curbing emissions from existing power plants.

Republicans do not like that idea at all, and have introduced bills in Congress to strip the EPA of its regulatory authority over greenhouse gases. (They also have no intention of passing any measures of their own to fight climate change.) They often accused Lisa Jackson, the agency's previous boss, of disregarding the cumulative impact of its many clean-air rules, and suffocating industry as a result.

Yet Ms McCarthy makes an unlikely target. She has worked for Republican governors in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Industry groups mustered kind words about her nomination. As Mr Obama put it, "She's earned a reputation as a straight-shooter."

Mr Moniz is even less likely to provoke determined opposition in the Senate, which must approve both appointments. He is a physicist, like the current secretary, Steven Chu, (although unlike Mr Chu, he has not won a Nobel prize). He knows the Department of Energy, having served as an undersecretary in the Clinton administration. He shares the president's enthusiasm for renewable power and other nascent green technologies, but he has also spoken in favour of building more nuclear reactors and of natural gas as "a bridge" to a low-carbon future. His nomination has attracted more criticism from environmentalists (who complain that he is too enthusiastic about fracking, a controversial method of extracting oil and gas from impermeable rock) than from the coal lobby, despite his eagerness to put a price on carbon emissions, an idea it resists furiously.

The two appointments, says Paul Bledsoe, an energy consultant, suggest that Mr Obama is looking for more politically adroit ways to promote his energy policies than a straight fight. The president might, for example, announce at the same time the approval of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline extension, which would increase imports of a particularly mucky form of oil from Canada, and the adoption of limits on greenhouse-gas emissions from existing power plants. That would help defuse claims that he is a knee-jerk environmentalist, even as he follows through on his ultimatum to Congress.

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