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DOE's national labs prepare for Trump

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Directors of the Energy Department's network of national laboratories are still wondering how President-elect Donald Trump will change their mission, but they know they will have to find a new way to talk about it.

No longer will the emphasis be on international cooperation to fight climate change and limit the number of nuclear weapons around the globe. Instead, lab directors are pitching their work as vital to American greatness — research that helps create jobs here at home and puts the U.S. ahead of competitors like China.

Tensions are running high across DOE with the Trump transition already on the lookout for employees whose work seems out of step with Trump's views and that of former Texas Gov. Rick Perry, the real estate mogul's pick for Energy secretary, who has said he wants to eliminate DOE.

The lab directors will get their first taste of life with Trump Wednesday, when they are scheduled to sit down as a group with the transition team for the first time.

Shifts in White House energy priorities are nothing new to the 17 labs that carry out DOE's mission, which are sprawled across the country. But Trump threatens to upend their mission unlike anyone else who ran for the GOP nomination, given his doubts about both climate change science and nuclear nonproliferation that are so fundamental to the labs' work.

"We're collectively concerned about what it means for the lab portfolios," said Jill Hruby, the director of Sandia national lab, in an interview last month. "There's climate research directly, and then there's all the things that we're doing that support it like renewable energy, nuclear energy, all sorts of things."

Trump's DOE transition team is led by the conservative American Energy Alliance President Tom Pyle, so all of the agency's work on climate change and renewable energy will be under scrutiny — and possibly on the chopping block. AEA, which has also deployed an economist to the DOE transition, has made broad attacks on vehicle efficiency programs, wind-friendly tax credits and biofuels.

While the six sitting lab directors POLITICO interviewed all made clear it is not their place to dictate policy to the new administration, they all stressed how vital the labs are to DOE's overall mission. Experts from the labs were deployed to help fix the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil

spill, analyze the monthslong natural gas leak in California a year ago, and develop the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project.

Lab directors and their employees also have a keen interest in how things shake out: dramatic spending cuts often result in layoffs at the labs, which are mostly staffed by contractors who don't have the civil service job protections in place at DOE headquarters in Washington. And policy shifts risk upending international collaborations that can be years in the making.

Last week, the Trump transition team caused a stir when it sent a 74-point questionnaire to the agency that requested the names of employees and contractors who worked on President Barack Obama's climate initiatives. That same list of questions also asked the labs to list what professional associations lab staff belong to.

All but one of the labs is run by contractors like Battelle or Lockheed Martin, and their directors' tenure aren't tied to whoever is sitting in the Oval Office. Lab directors also have a seat at the meetings between DOE and the landing teams to explain their mission and make their pitch for what they'd like to hold onto. All 17 lab directors, who will be in Washington Wednesday, are slated to sit down with Pyle and possibly other members of Trump's agency landing team. Since the labs touch just about everything the agency does, no one on the transition has been specifically tasked with overseeing all of them.

Other aspects of the labs' organization also may help insulate them from the changing political winds.

One advantage is the labs' decentralized makeup, which means there are dozens of lawmakers with a stake in the thousands of high-paying jobs they provide. The national labs have a major presence in 14 states, so nearly a third of the Senate has one back home. The two energy and water appropriations cardinals, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho), both have labs in their states and are strong defenders of DOE research programs.

"If [relations] are really bad," said Bud Albright, a former energy undersecretary under George W. Bush, "they certainly could frustrate a secretary by back-channeling to the Hill, and triggering oversight hearings and just being like a swarm of hungry mosquitoes eating at you all the time."

But lab directors are hoping to be able to work with Trump, even if they have to change how they describe their work. The president-elect's DOE teams should expect to get an earful about jobs, jobs, jobs.

"The question in my mind is really around whether this administration can get behind clean energy and climate as a potential job-creator," Hruby said. "It'd be more compelling for them in that context based on what we know [from the campaign], than climate itself."

Idaho national lab director Mark Peters said his lab's work on nuclear energy would likely be discussed in more expansive terms than its carbon-free profile.

“You’re seeing bipartisan support for [nuclear energy] because of climate, but also because of national security and competitiveness,” Peters said. “So, perhaps the narrative becomes a little bit more broad.”

Peter Littlewood, Argonne national lab’s outgoing director, said he expects some labs will look to recalibrate their language with the transition. Argonne has a focus on high-speed computing and is upgrading their massive x-ray system, called the Advanced Photon Source, which scientists use to study a variety of materials.

“There are different ways to talk about that,” he said. “I can talk about that from a purely science agenda, but I can also talk about it as a competitive agenda on the international scene, say, with China because China’s investing massively in high-performance computing and also in synchrotrons. So, there’s a level of emphasis in how you talk about the same thing.”

The labs rely on the exchange of hundreds, if not thousands, of their own scientists to work abroad, as well as foreign researchers who come to the U.S. from elsewhere, so Trump’s America First rhetoric in the presidential race raised some questions about the free exchange of people, and multinational funding for facilities and projects. Some national labs have agreements in place to work with China, a favorite target of Trump.

On the campaign trail, Trump also said several eyebrow-raising things about nuclear weapons and nonproliferation, including suggesting that Japan could defend itself with nukes and questioning the value of NATO, an underpinning of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

“We work with countries all over the world to help secure nuclear materials and to implement agreements of various sorts,” Sandia's Hruby said. “If the extreme conditions on the campaign trail of basically not helping anybody do anything outside of the United States [were to be implemented], that would have a big impact on our nuclear nonproliferation program.”

Because the lab directors aren’t tied to the White House occupant, President George W. Bush’s second energy secretary, Sam Bodman, saw them as a way to bridge administrations, Oak Ridge national lab director Thom Mason said.

“He was looking at the transition coming up as President Bush neared the end of his second term knowing there would be an election,” he added. “And he felt that it would be good for the labs to be in a position to help serve as a mechanism of continuity.”

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz has tried to improve coordination within the labs system, which may help avoid bureaucratic infighting over scarce resources.

Little-noticed structural changes — particularly in the form of special boards and committees — that Moniz implemented at DOE have been praised by the lab directors, who say they intend to emphasize their value to Trump's team. Moniz has enticed the labs to work together by streamlining directives they get from headquarters and loosening travel restrictions, among other reforms.

Republicans in Congress have repeatedly sought to make big cuts in the one-third of DOE's nearly \$30 billion budget devoted to so-called applied energy programs like energy efficiency and renewable energy — and Trump's team has signaled he will follow suit. And some labs have already complained about stagnant budgets.

“Let's be clear, the last few years have been very tight at the labs. Our budgets are not growing, we're doing more with less,” Littlewood said. “Quite broadly across the lab system, everything has been quite stressed. So, it's not that there's a lot of cash in the bank to rely on to tide over a lean few years.”

Still, the current directors hope they can maintain a united front.

“I do think that among this group of lab directors, we understand at some level, the system wins and loses together,” Hruby said, echoing other lab directors. “But clearly, part of our job is to watch out for our own institutions. It's only a natural thing.”