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John Podesta: The man behind President Obama's new environmental push

By [Juliet Eilperin](#), Published: March 3 | Updated: Tuesday, March 4, 5:00 AM

New White House counselor [John Podesta](#) is playing a central role in pushing the Obama administration to adopt a more aggressive posture on environmental policies this year, including rules that would provide [greater protections for public lands](#), support for state and local efforts to cut carbon emissions and stricter oversight of mining near pristine waterways, according to a dozen administration officials and outside allies.

The Democratic strategist's role at the White House, which includes steering climate and public lands policies, provides the clearest indication yet that President Obama and his top aides are increasingly focused on cementing a presidential legacy on the environment during his remaining time in office. That focus will be on full display Tuesday in the administration's budget proposal, which will ask for \$1 billion to cope with global warming's impacts, shift how the government pays for wildfires and include new proposals aimed at tackling climate change.

The shift has cheered environmental activists and many liberals but has unnerved some centrist Democrats — particularly in the Senate — who face tough reelection fights this fall in Republican-leaning states hostile to environmental regulations. And congressional Republicans say Podesta symbolizes a radicalized approach to environmental issues by the administration that will cost jobs.

In the past month, Podesta has met privately with Democratic senators to discuss where the administration might put federal land [off-limits to development](#); urged key agencies to identify other ways they can reduce the nation's greenhouse gas emissions; coached officials on how to integrate the issue of global warming into policy debates; and organized a White House meeting between the president and eight governors on climate change and drought.

Podesta, who declined to comment for this article, also urged the Environmental Protection Agency to examine whether to [block a proposed gold and copper mine in Alaska](#) that he had privately criticized before entering the West Wing. On Friday, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy, who discussed the issue with Podesta, according to an administration official, initiated the review and put the project on hold.

Podesta, who helped guide environmental policies under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, came to the Obama administration at the start of the year as part of an attempt by Obama and his staff to jump-start his agenda after a disappointing fifth year marked by partisan standoffs and the bungled rollout of the president's health-care law. Similar in stature to former advisers David Plouffe and David Axelrod, Podesta has quickly elevated global warming's profile and given new impetus to other [environmental proposals that had stalled](#), according to several administration officials.

Podesta's influence is plainly visible at times. During one Maryland event last month highlighting [greater fuel efficiency in large trucks](#), Podesta stood off the riser with arms crossed, just to the president's left.

Other times it is more subtle. He helped insert a line in January's State of the Union speech suggesting that if Congress does not do more to safeguard public lands for future generations, the president will do it.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee (D), who attended the Podesta-brokered meeting last week between governors and Obama, said in an interview that Podesta "speaks through his actions" and that the session "demonstrated in the most tangible way how committed the president is to trying to address this issue. It showed that we have a real situation. They actually said as much."

While still head of the liberal Center for American Progress, Podesta privately urged White House officials to appoint a senior adviser to tackle climate and energy policy. Now he not only occupies that post but also is working on broader conservation issues that longtime aide [Pete Rouse](#) oversaw before leaving in January. Podesta is, in effect, the most powerful environmental czar to serve in the federal government.

"He's clearly the one person in the White House who understands these issues, cares about these issues and has the president's ear," said Whit Fosburgh, president of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

Podesta has delved into other issues during his first months on the job, including privacy and national security debates. But he has made it clear to those who know him that he will judge his most recent West Wing stint largely on whether he can deliver on Obama's commitment to tackle global warming.

"John was very candid that he came into the White House to make sure they got this right," said Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), who met with Podesta on Feb. 10 to discuss how the administration could expand its climate goals.

That is exactly what worries many congressional Republicans, who view Podesta as an unchecked proponent of federal regulation when it comes to energy and other industries.

"The nostalgic memories of the Clinton administration are not so sweet for those of us in the West who are still trying to recover," said Rep. Rob Bishop (R-Utah), who chairs the House Natural Resources subcommittee on public lands and environmental regulation.

Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.), who chairs the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on energy and power, said he understands that Podesta joined Obama's staff with a specific mission.

"He said, 'I want to protect the legacy of the president' — not protect the overall welfare of the American people, but the legacy of the president," Whitfield said. "He's very aggressive, and he believes in pushing the envelope — if you've got the power, utilize it. That's probably one of the reasons there's a strong sentiment that this president is going way too far, way too fast and threatening the constitutional separation of powers."

Podesta has directed key officials across several agencies to push for more-ambitious climate policies than those Obama outlined in June. Possibilities include making energy data more widely available and using coastal wetland and mangrove conservation as a way of storing more carbon.

McCarthy said Podesta has "been laser focused" on ensuring that the existing aspects of the president's climate plan — including a [proposal to limit carbon dioxide from existing power plants](#) — remain on track so they can be completed before Obama leaves office.

People at the White House, including the president, have also begun talking more about global warming in recent months as a way to shift the political debate.

"He spoke about how important it was to be sharing scientific information with the public and letting them know the depths of this crisis, even if we don't have the total solution during this term in office," Inslee said of Obama, saying he "sees himself as a baton carrier in a relay race" that will extend into future

administrations.

There is one high-profile issue that Podesta is staying out of: whether to allow construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline to transport heavy crude from Canada to U.S. refineries. Vulnerable incumbent senators such as [Mary Landrieu](#) (La.) and Mark Begich (Alaska) have pushed for its approval, while climate activists strongly oppose it.

Republicans said they are limited in what they can do to counter this new environmental push. The House is set to vote on legislation Wednesday that would limit how aggressively the EPA could regulate carbon from power plants, but the bill is not expected to pass the Senate. But Stephen Brown, vice president for government relations at the oil refiner Tesoro, said it might be Democrats who experience the political fallout in the midterms.

“This White House has rarely prioritized aligning its policy agenda with the political needs of Capitol Hill Democrats, particularly those in the center,” Brown wrote in an e-mail. “The 2014 Senate elections in some states are starting to feel like the 2010 House ones — the wave may not hit the beach like back then, but if you are wearing a blue jersey in a red-leaning state it is definitely a Maalox moment.”

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