

Obama Calls On Businessman Bryson To Lead Commerce

Julie Pace, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama has chosen businessman John Bryson to lead the Commerce Department, bringing another private sector player into an administration that has been making a concerted effort to improve its relationship with the business community.

Bryson, 67, is a former chairman and chief executive officer of Edison International, a California-based energy company. He also has an extensive background in environmental issues, having co-founded the Natural Resources Defense Council and served on a United Nations advisory group on energy and climate change.

"John will be an important part of my economic team, working with the business community, fostering growth, and helping open up new markets abroad to promote jobs and opportunities here at home," Obama said in a statement announcing Bryson's selection on Tuesday.

If confirmed by the Senate, Bryson would replace outgoing Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, whom Obama recently named as his next ambassador to China.

Republicans have threatened to block any nominee to lead the Commerce Department until the administration submits proposed free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama to Congress for final approval. The first steps in that process are under way, but it is unclear when lawmakers might receive final versions of the trade pacts.

Among Bryson's tasks at the Commerce Department will be leading Obama's efforts to double U.S. exports in the next four years and representing American business interests abroad, particularly in rapidly expanding Asian markets.

Bryson is the latest businessman to be brought into the administration's fold as the White House grapples with ways to shake its reputation as antibusiness. Private sector leaders have griped about what they see as burdensome new financial and health care regulations, unfriendly tax policies and vast government spending. They were also put off by Obama's harsh depiction of "fat cat bankers" and "reckless practices," a label he applied both to Wall Street and to oil giant BP following the Gulf oil spill.

Following the sweeping Republican victories in the 2010 midterm elections, Obama admitted that he hadn't done enough to assure the business community that he was on its side. That admission was quickly followed by news that Obama would name Bill Daley, a JPMorgan Chase executive, as his chief of staff, giving the business community an ally at the highest levels of the White House.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

The president has also named Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, to head an outside panel of economic advisers, known as the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness. Several other private sector leaders, including those representing small businesses, were also named to the council.

Bryson served as Edison's CEO for 18 years, retiring in 2008. He's since served on a number of corporate boards, including The Boeing Company, The Walt Disney Company, and Coda Automotive, Inc. He is also co-chairman of the Pacific Council on International Policy, a non-partisan group that focuses on policy issues that are of specific importance to the West Coast.

Associated Press news researcher Judith Ausuebel in New York contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on 04/26/2015 - 11:06pm):

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